



CollaboratorySM

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FORT MYERS
— FLORIDA —



ACTIVATE MIDTOWN

Recommendations by the CRE[®] Consulting Corps

Fort Myers, FL
February 2023

Contents

| | |
|--|----|
| Executive Summary..... | 3 |
| Introduction..... | 6 |
| Shared Vision | 8 |
| Targets and Success Measures | 10 |
| Target Market | 11 |
| Catalytic Impact..... | 14 |
| Opportunities and Solutions | 15 |
| Aspirations | 15 |
| Confidence and Trust Building | 15 |
| Bold, Long-Term Goals | 15 |
| Collective Engagement | 17 |
| Civic and Business Engagement | 17 |
| Meaningful Connection to Downtown and Adjacent Neighborhoods | 19 |
| Collective Vision | 23 |
| Government | 24 |
| Leadership Development..... | 24 |
| Government Restructuring | 25 |
| Need for Early Successes | 26 |
| Land Use | 27 |
| Economic Development..... | 28 |
| Regional Organization | 28 |
| Economic Development Tools..... | 28 |
| TIF Reform | 29 |
| Government Funding | 31 |
| Housing | 31 |
| Journey to Work | 31 |
| Housing Attainability | 32 |
| Housing Development | 33 |

| | |
|---|----|
| Site Opportunities | 35 |
| Sports as a Driver in Midtown | 35 |
| Institutional Ownership | 37 |
| Arts and Culture | 40 |
| Public Green Space and Waterfront | 41 |
| Innovation Convening Center | 42 |
| Campus Development..... | 43 |
| Infrastructure | 44 |
| Water Predictability | 44 |
| Infrastructure Planning | 44 |
| Regional Influences | 46 |
| Best Practices for Resiliency..... | 46 |
| Insurance Predictability | 47 |
| Tactics and Strategies | 49 |
| Short-term Tactics | 49 |
| Long-term Site Strategies | 50 |
| Stadium | 50 |
| Skatium..... | 51 |
| The News Press Site..... | 52 |
| Government Facilities..... | 54 |
| Conclusion | 57 |
| Appendix I – Case Studies and Resources | 58 |
| Appendix II – TIF Policies and Applications and RFP/RFQ Examples..... | 59 |
| Appendix III – Acknowledgements | 60 |
| Appendix IV – The Counselors of Real Estate® and CRE® Consulting Corps..... | 62 |
| Appendix V – The Team | 63 |

Executive Summary

The City of Fort Myers has seen significant growth in recent years, including increased population and successful reinvestment in the historic Downtown. However, little redevelopment has occurred in the adjacent Midtown community, which has numerous underutilized properties, including the stadium, which formerly hosted the Boston Red Sox for spring training, and which is within walking distance from Downtown. Job and business growth throughout Lee County, along with demographic trends driving interest in walkable communities suggest significant demand for places to live, work, and play in this urban neighborhood. Organic development has not taken off, and despite numerous past planning efforts, there is a lack of a shared vision for the community's future.

Nonprofit community foundation Collaboratory engaged The Counselors of Real Estate® (CRE) Consulting Corps for technical assistance in outlining action-oriented steps to advance redevelopment in the Midtown neighborhood. The team visited Fort Myers in December 2022 to meet with stakeholders, review past plans, examine demographic, market, and employment data, and assess market conditions.

Fort Myers is an attractive, desirable place, with many assets and engaged stakeholders. However, The CRE Consulting Corps team observed several challenges. First, the team found that the community lacks a shared vision that includes all stakeholder input. The next challenge facing the community is that government structure has not yet adapted to opportunities presented by growth pressures. In order to encourage growth and shape a community that meets community desires and objectives, the government must revisit its planning and economic development functions, as well as its policies and procedures related to public incentives. The third set of priorities the team identified relates to infrastructure, including a need to invest in water and transportation infrastructure, as well as the potential to foster a sense of connectivity through such investments as sidewalks, lighting, signage, and the like. Fourth, the team recommends that the City of Fort Myers capitalize on its assets—namely the waterfront, its climate, business leaders, and seasonal residents. Finally, the report offers suggestions to activate Midtown through placemaking and community creation.

The team offers the following priority action steps:

Critical Success Factors: These first steps are the foundation for the following and future action items.

1. Be proactive by defining City priorities and requiring their inclusion in future development. Establish a cabinet-level planning department and, potentially, a housing department.
 - Take a broad set of leaders on a trip to visit inspiring communities (e.g., St. Petersburg, San Antonio, Greenville).
2. Build the team, being deliberate about collaboration and soliciting active leadership from underrepresented constituencies and empowering established community members.
3. Get a clear picture of the market viability for targeted uses, identifying the optimal mix for Midtown/Downtown. These uses should include residents, businesses, and visitors.

4. Reimagine the Tax Increment Financing (TIF) process. Ensure clear priorities, guidelines, underwriting, and transparency.
5. Leverage incentives by requiring public benefits in exchange for TIF and other forms of public investment, including:
 - Attainability set-asides for all projects receiving public financing, subsidy, or taxpayer money, especially TIF, with permanent restrictions and monitoring for compliance;
 - Density trade-offs (allow taller buildings with upper story setbacks, street-level plazas, greenspace, etc.);
 - Art installations that benefit the public and support the local artist community;
 - Innovative infrastructure (such as onsite water treatment, greywater, retention, district cooling/power, etc.).



Priority Action Steps: These steps can be initiated right away, but their success is largely dependent on the Critical Success Factors being in place.

6. Partner with Lee County and business leaders on regional economic development.
7. Expand the economic development toolbox with additional incentives, programs and partners.
8. Invest in banners, streetlights, paver sidewalks to visually connect Downtown to Midtown. Extend the sidewalk along Fowler at Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Blvd. Repair sidewalks in Midtown.
 - Expand the tools to fund infrastructure.
9. Leverage Stadium, Skatium, and sports in Midtown:
 - Conduct an updated assessment and market study focused on sporting activities (if necessary, based on prior 2017 report).
 - Commit resources—staff and financial—to develop programming and activities (e.g., music festivals, sports, events) for a limited time with a firm deadline and performance measures

(tangible and intangible) to make a final determination regarding the long-term viability of the stadium.

- Expand the Skatium (upward, not outward), enhance programming, and build business and institutional sponsorship and support.

10. Curate the development of the News Press site.

- Plan, market, and pre-develop the site.
- Optimize value by carefully timing development process start.
- Engage a development advisor and prepare and actively distribute the RFQ/RFP to a national development market.
- Consider interim uses such as art, community garden, and fire search and rescue training.

11. Assess government buildings in Midtown.

- Consider creating a joint City-County facility near or adjacent to Downtown/Midtown.
- Relocate the police headquarters outside of Midtown, review alternative sites within the Choice Neighborhoods Implementation (CNI) area, request U.S. Dept. of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and associated approvals as needed (if the site is outside the CNI area, or proposing an alternative local match for CNI).
- Consider relocation of some government services out of the Downtown/Midtown area if they do not align with long-term development aspirations.

12. Fully engage in post-Hurricane Ian recovery process with federal agencies to maximize resources.

13. Train and inspire leadership and the public by providing economic development, real estate development and other “101-level” workshops.

By engaging the broader community, building on assets, and leading proactively, the City of Fort Myers can optimize the opportunity to develop and grow in a way that provides broad public benefits and yields a remarkable, authentic, vibrant community.

Introduction

The City of Fort Myers, Florida, was the sixth fastest growing city in the country from 2020 to 2021, with a population of approximately 92,000 people in 2021, according to the U.S. Census. This continued a trend of significant growth in the City and Lee County over the last decade. The City has experienced successful Downtown revitalization in recent years, but the redevelopment has not yet spurred growth in the adjacent Midtown neighborhood. While the City of Fort Myers has numerous plans for the Downtown/Midtown area, the community does not have a shared vision for its future development, and key sites remain underutilized.

Collaboratory is a nonprofit community foundation (formerly known as Southwest Florida Community Foundation) promoting sustainable development, capacity building, and social problem-solving in southwest Florida. Collaboratory requested that The Counselors of Real Estate® (CRE) Consulting Corps assess current conditions and offer recommendations for advancing redevelopment in the Midtown neighborhood.

In September 2022, the CRE Consulting Corps team leader visited Fort Myers to prepare for the team's planned site visit. Shortly thereafter, Hurricane Ian struck southwest Florida, causing significant devastation. To provide disaster response guidance, several members of The Counselors of Real Estate® spent time in Fort Myers in October, held listening sessions, and delivered housing and commercial real estate recommendations.

The CRE Consulting Corps team visited Fort Myers again in December 2022, retaining the initial focus on Midtown while incorporating the lens of hurricane recovery. The team was onsite for several days and met with City staff and elected officials, developers, representatives of community and arts organizations, and many other stakeholders. The team examined demographic and economic data, reviewed numerous prior plans and studies, and analyzed information provided by the City of Fort Myers, Lee County, the Community Redevelopment Authority, the housing authority, and other stakeholders.

The Consulting Corps team identified a number of issues of concern, including lack of shared vision and confidence, a perceived barrier between Downtown and Midtown, a need to be proactive rather than reactive, a limited economic development toolbox, a shortage of workforce housing, a large number of government and institutional properties in Midtown, and insufficient demands for public benefit in exchange for public investment in development projects.

This report presents the Consulting Corps team's findings and recommendations, beginning with a recommended process for developing a shared vision and understanding the market. Next, the report identifies key issues and action steps to address those issues, followed by property-based solutions, tactics, and strategies. Resources and case studies are included in the Appendix.

Growth in recent years demonstrates demand for places to live, work, and play in Fort Myers. With shared vision and proactive planning, the community has the opportunity to foster equitable development that meets the needs of current and future residents. With the additional energy and attention resulting from Hurricane Ian, the community can proactively leverage resources and collaborate with the private sector, the County and other jurisdictions. Fort Myers already has the elements that are impossible to replicate – it is time to let people know about this emerging opportunity and that the community is ready for growth. The rebuilding of a community following a major natural disaster provides a rare opportunity to reexamine policies and processes and address infrastructure and housing issues. It would behoove Fort Myers to seize this opportunity.

Shared Vision

Developing a shared vision is a critical launching point for any endeavor, and it is essential in the complex and diverse arena of place-making. A shared vision should be long-term, inspiring and enduring. It should cut through personalities, agendas, and politics.

Often, cities work toward short-term goals without context, only to see priorities shift as staff or elected leaders change. Think of a container ship turning around in the Panama Canal. Everything comes to a grinding halt. It is costly, and there is damage and lost opportunities. This is a common occurrence in city governance.

While in Fort Myers, the Consulting Corps had the privilege of speaking to many stakeholders and reviewing earlier reports which reflected additional voices. While the Consulting Corps cannot presume to speak for local stakeholders, nearly everyone seemed to agree that they wanted the same thing: an authentic, vibrant community.

That can be defined as a community where everyone is welcome, and which is affordable to inhabitants across socio-economic levels. A place that is activated, that has its own energy, its own identity. A place that is safe and enjoyable. A place to play, to create, to invest, to build, to contribute. A place that endures. A place to call home.

Stakeholders referred to cities such as St. Petersburg, St. Augustine, and Downtown Greenville, SC, as useful models for re-envisioning Midtown. Vibrant today, these downtowns were once inactivated and virtually abandoned. Like Midtown, they all had existing downtown form and fabric. Remarkably, they all have a waterfront.

Today each of these cities can be held up as examples of revitalization, and each can be described as “an authentic, vibrant community” with the characteristics noted above. All have attracted new residents as a variety of housing options were delivered. They first invested in and capitalized on existing assets, such as parks and waterfronts, gathering places, interesting places to walk, a variety of entertainment activities, and services for the incoming residents. They worked with planners and developers to engage in their vision and articulate their goals. The incentives awarded were tied to priorities. Today, retailers, residents, and businesses do not need any incentives or persuasion to move to these vibrant communities. Finally, all three have capitalized on their waterfront as defining their identity.

These vibrant communities also attract visitors and commerce. Interesting, authentic, and vibrant communities are good economic drivers with impacts that extend beyond their borders.

In addition, each of these vibrant downtowns features some version of the following elements:

- Digital connectivity;
- Safe, engaging pedestrian experiences;
- Open gathering spaces that welcome all;
- A range of housing choices, in price and form;
- A population large enough to support local commerce;
- A pervasive, active arts community;
- Outdoor activities and recreation;
- A variety of dining and entertainment options;
- Accommodations for visitors and short-term residents.

Many communities encompass the amenities on the preceding list and are attractive places to live, work, play, and learn, but remarkable places have:

- An authentic, people-scaled personality—a vibe; and
- A unique reason to be there—a spark.

Fort Myers' Midtown District has enormous potential to do all of the above and become a truly remarkable place.

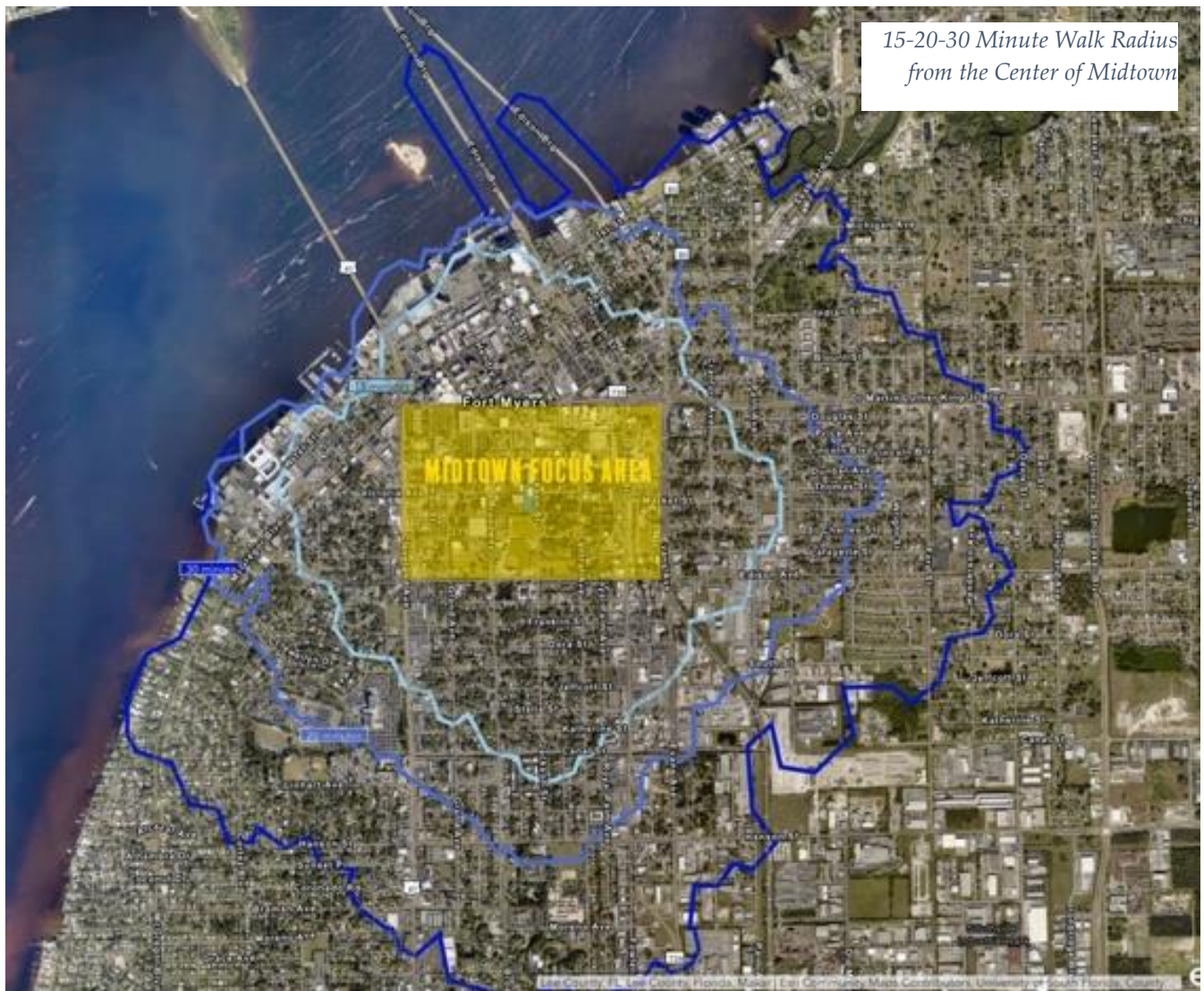
Targets and Success Measures

Fort Myers' Midtown District is a canvas of opportunity. Yet without a road map, the vast sense of possibility can leave decision-makers naturally paralyzed. This reveals the need for clear goals and objectives, along with the articulation of critical success factors that will be found throughout this document. Having this in hand, leaders can wield the incentives most effectively toward those catalytic projects that meet these objectives and pass on those that do not. The following steps must be developed with City Council and staff responsible for implementation. Clear understanding and agreement will facilitate success.

1. Identify target market: Compare the Midtown District to other aspirational cities and determine what population groups are missing. Orient marketing efforts toward and develop products that will attract these groups. (A brief review of these demographic groups can be found below, later in this section.)
2. Build an incentive toolbox: Curate a portfolio of incentives that help cure the “but for” for developers and the private sector to deliver the most highly valued elements such as workforce housing, greenspace contribution, and/or business incubator space. These are uses that are highly desirable but not easily supported with private market financing.
3. Identify sites for catalytic impact: With a target market identified, choose sites where housing and new development is best suited. Which sites need to be developed first? Cast a vision for the style, scale, height, materials, and street experience of each. The use of vision boards with images of “ideal” projects can help developers and city leaders agree on the same vision and priorities.
4. Communicate Midtown's priorities that would qualify for incentives: Connect potential investors and developers to a clearly articulated vision. Letting developers know that there are incentives available in exchange for delivering on these priorities communicates a spirit of intention and partnership. These can include targets or programs such as percentage of workforce housing, specific streetscape investment, greenspace contribution, resource commitment to a “public realm fund” that would seek matching grants to implement streetscape, wayfinding, and pocket parks, etc.
5. Establish a clear, reliable, and fair application process and approval timeline: What separates two markets with similar demand drivers is the ease of execution. Developers and investors are more likely to deliver outside their “prescriptive” projects if there is a clear roadmap sharing the vision, an efficient and reliable process for approval, and clarity on how decisions are made and by whom.
6. Establish an ombudsman: Perhaps a government supported private organization or person, this individual would guide a developer through the process, reviewing applications prior to submission to the City.

Target Market

While this is not a substitute for a market study, the Consulting Corps conducted a quick review of how Fort Myers' Midtown District compared with Downtown St. Petersburg and Downtown Greenville, two cities often referenced in conversations with stakeholders. A target area for each of the three cities was defined, by applying a 15-minute walk radius to delineate the Downtown market area. The concept of having most services and amenities within a 15-minute walk from the front door is a popular construct in today's planning community, defining the density of goods, services, and residents that must be present to thrive. This also allows a comparison to cities with similar urban structures.



Light blue radius indicates 15-minute walk from the center of Midtown. 20 minute walk indicated in medium blue. 30 minute walk radius shown in dark blue.

As depicted in the aerial, a 15-minute walk from the center of Midtown encompasses a broad area, beyond just the Midtown neighborhood. When considering appropriate population density, residents and businesses are not limited by a neighborhood's specific boundaries. Rather, it is reasonable to assume

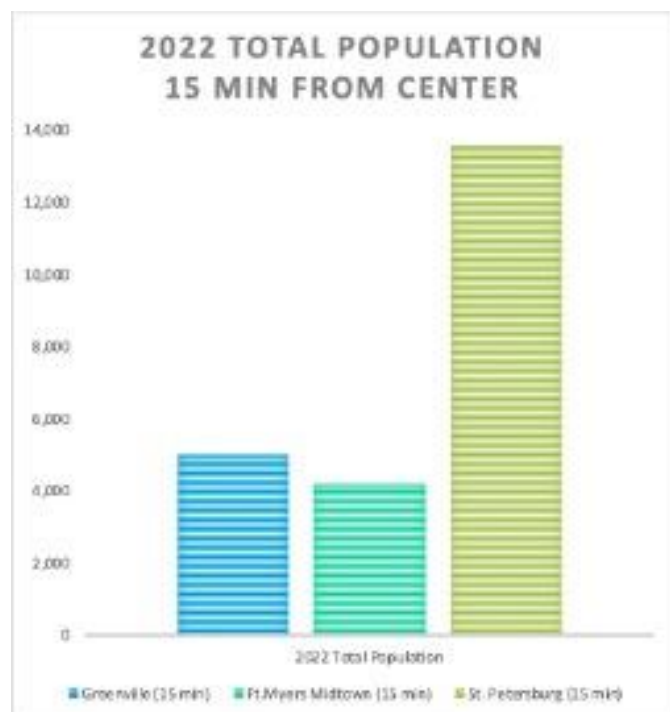
that local enterprises can attract users from this 15-minute radius. Applying the same construct to both Greenville and St. Petersburg allows a high-level comparison of the three markets. ESRI estimates the 2022 population of Greenville's Downtown market area to be 5,011 and 74,710 for the city population as a whole, which is similar to Fort Myers' Midtown market area at 4,191 and 94,000 for the entire city; the cities are comparable with regard to population and density. St. Petersburg has a larger population than both with more than 259,000 total residents and more than 13,500 residents in the market area.

Example from St. Petersburg and Greenville

Before leadership began to work toward a more vibrant future, both St. Petersburg and Greenville were dusty and outdated. Both cities focused first on their waterfront— with Greenville taking what looked like a large drainage ditch and turning it into a clean riverfront. Both cities invested in placemaking with comfortable sidewalks, interesting avenues, safe crossings, and attractive lighting. They also invested heavily in the arts— both visual and performing.

All over the country, walkable, yet neighborhood-scaled, environments attract young people and seniors alike. Authenticity is an enormous driver for the renewed success of these places that were once left behind for cul-de-sacs and shopping malls. A variety of housing choices and lifestyles support each other when woven together in proximity and create a more interesting and exciting place to live.

Another factor shaping these trends is the disruption of home-office commutes by the COVID-19 outbreak, with the widespread adoption of remote work. Two demographics, Millennials and Boomers, seem to have embraced this shift with great enthusiasm. Millennials choosing to live where they want first, then where to work; and Boomers easing into retirement by shifting to partial remote work or even launching new online businesses from their location of choice. Remarkably, Boomers and Millennials seeking walkable “urban” environments, are often landing in the same places.



Using ESRI's Tapestry Segmentation, which analyzes America's neighborhoods by socioeconomic and demographic characteristics, the Consulting Corps compared the three 15-minute market areas and observed that there are predictable demographic "recipes" to be found in most vibrant, walkable, "urban" neighborhoods. Looking farther, these same demographic sectors appear in other vibrant, walkable places across Florida.

One example is Metro Renters, a dominant demographic found in Tampa, West Palm Beach, Boca Raton, and St. Petersburg. While Metro Renters can also be found in large markets such as NYC, Atlanta, and Washington, DC, the desire to live in a connected, vibrant walkable neighborhood, more often leads to smaller, less "high-urban" places such as these Florida markets. Several that the team sees being potential target markets for the Fort Myers Midtown District are shared below. These are all market sectors that are attracted to the existing and emerging neighborhood characteristics and amenities planned for Midtown.

METRO RENTERS: An affluent, young, and well-educated market. With a median age of 32.5, they are highly mobile and often rent. They are astute consumers, researching new purchases and investments and seeking sophistication. While many are currently enrolled in college, they are very interested in the fine arts and value creativity. They are willing to take risks and work long hours to get to the top of their professions. Earning a median income of \$67,000 per year, they value socializing and spend more than the national average on every budget sector. Shopping at places like Trader Joe's and Whole Foods for groceries, they are willing to spend more for organic goods. They probably own a Mac and use it for work and entertainment and are likely to use a tablet to read newspapers and magazines. It is easy to imagine these residents starting new businesses and leading future enterprises.

SET TO IMPRESS: This segment is also young, with a median age of 33.9 and a median income of \$32,800. They are mobile and well educated with many being enrolled in college. They enjoy living where they can walk or bike to work, and while they are looking for a deal, they are engaged in popular music and the local music scene. They are connected digitally, using the internet for social media, video games, and TV programs. Rock concerts, nightclubs, and local outings fill in leisure time.

SILVER & GOLD: Somewhat more dominant in Florida Coastal markets, this sector is growing with the Boomers nationwide and seeing an explosion in most Florida markets. The average age is 63.2 years and, with a median income of \$72,100, this is the most affluent sector of the senior market. They have free time and resources to pursue activities and interests. This is a well-educated sector with 47% having college degrees and 41% still active in the labor force. Self-employment is highest in this sector of all sectors, but members can certainly afford an active social life, travel, and hobbies such as golf and boating. It is no surprise that concentrations of this sector are found along the Florida coast and the entire East Coast. Homeownership is strong at 83.2%.

Catalytic Impact

A well-executed development plan that incorporates housing, services, dining, and recreational establishments in a connected neighborhood can expect growth in sales and commerce. The buzz, activity, and reliable presence of permanent residents supports and grows local businesses and visitors alike.

Returning to the 15-minute walk areas, observe that today Greenville, with slightly higher residential density and presence of key demographic sectors, possesses twice as many eating and drinking businesses as Midtown. Sales figures are nearly three times as high. While further research would be needed to support causality, it seems a worthy observation to note.

| 15-Minute Walk Area | | | |
|---|-------------------|---------------------|-------------------------|
| | Ft. Myers Midtown | Greenville Downtown | St. Petersburg Downtown |
| 2022 Total (SIC01-99) Businesses | 1,199 | 1,621 | 2,564 |
| 2022 Total (SIC01-99) Employees | 10,006 | 22,778 | 23,299 |
| 2022 Eating & Drinking (SIC58) Businesses | 69 | 139 | 167 |
| 2022 Eating & Drinking (SIC58) Sales | \$42,730 | \$86,650 | \$81,847 |
| 2022 Eating & Drinking (SIC58) Employees | 883 | 1,803 | 1,638 |
| 2022 Retail Goods | \$27,442,688 | \$104,654,797 | \$220,133,456 |

Fort Myers has one of the few remaining Downtown centers in Florida that features true historic urban fabric, access to a waterfront, a viable business district, and performing arts venues—but which has yet to see an explosion of residential offerings. It is walkable, pedestrian-scale, and offers a growing portfolio of dining and entertainment choices. Today it can leverage the increased mobility of the post-COVID economy to attract residents seeking authentic, high-quality-of-life environments, affordable living choices, and recreation options.

Opportunities and Solutions

Aspirations

Confidence and Trust Building

Fort Myers and Midtown, specifically, are wrestling with the challenge of confidence and trust-building. Neither City government, nor the community at large, recognize this area's inherent domestic value, which has led to a vacuum where pride and empowerment typically live. As a result, opportunities are missed, and public benefits are overlooked when decisions are made.

However, everything is fixable and a diligent, precise strategy can lead to permanent solutions. Such a strategy forces decision-makers to craft policy and solutions that address currently urgent matters, as well as ongoing future concerns. This culture of permanence should be pervasive throughout the entire Midtown conversation or there is a very real risk that short-term decisions will negatively impact the long-term health and vitality of the neighborhood, community, and city.

A throughline among conversations with Midtown stakeholders was that Fort Myers should simply “take what they can get” when it comes to development, investment in the community, and civic participation. The governing bodies and regulatory agencies within government should empower themselves to set the boundaries of what is expected of external participation and what is and is not acceptable when public financing, subsidy, or taxpayer money is at risk. This will ensure trackable, measurable, and repeatable results. These boundaries establish what the community wants and expects, and then the free market will respond, delivering projects and programs that are mutually beneficial. These specific actions should include:

- Using available public policy tools to enhance the public benefit of private projects.
- Establishing new tools and procedures for administration of public participation in private projects.
- Considering interests, interactions, and institutions in all decisions regarding Midtown. Buy-in from each of these will ensure a more representative process and result.
- Empowering agencies and departments to establish public requirements and evaluation criteria before approving public participation in private projects.

Bold, Long-Term Goals

"A vision without execution is just a hallucination" – Thomas Edison

It falls on the shoulders of City leadership to hold steady to the vision amid competing interests and agendas. Putting tangible goals and objectives in place will help make these visions a reality, keeping the larger team focused and moving forward. While the Consulting Corps identified a shared vision of “an

authentic, vibrant community” among stakeholders during the team’s visit, that vision still needs to be collectively defined in greater detail.

Critical to the success of these efforts will be City leadership’s ability to work across silos, look beyond individual agendas and past history, and bring stakeholders together to define better the goals and priorities that will drive the future. These goals will shape incentives and programs that need to be put in place, help make difficult choices when resources are limited, and guide new businesses and investors to participate in the vision. The goals should be big and bold with long-term impact. They should be limited only in number in order to keep focused on the highest priorities.

Today, one of Fort Myers' biggest challenges is an apparent disconnect between what is possible for the city and stakeholders' perceptions of those possibilities.

Today, one of Fort Myers' biggest challenges is an apparent disconnect between what is possible for the city and stakeholders’ perceptions of those possibilities. Most alarmingly, the more negative comments, indicating a low view of opportunities, came from those in positions to impact and affect new development. This calls for a significant shakeup of perspectives and an understanding of what possibilities the market will support. To effectively facilitate this pivot of perspective, the team believes the City leadership, including elected officials, philanthropists, business leaders and owners, City staff, and active stakeholders and volunteers, should come together and visit a few inspirational cities to learn how they effected change and attracted the growth they now enjoy. A day or two focused on these cities will align stakeholder expectations regarding what is required, how long it takes, how much it costs, and what leads to the most significant impact and therefore is the highest priority.

Greenville is known for hosting these tours; St. Petersburg also would be an excellent choice. Again, the objective behind such a tour is to get everyone on the same page while gathering ideas and inspiration for Fort Myers’ future.

The objective behind such a tour is to get everyone on the same page while gathering ideas and inspiration for Fort Myers’ future.

Prepare the team before the trip to familiarize them with the city’s history, its current demographics compared to Fort Myers, and what makes that city successful. Consider dividing into smaller mixed teams (i.e., not all staff, not all elected officials) in a series of meetings before the trip so that new relationships can be established and perspectives shared. These teams can also each focus on researching

a particular facet of the city development, such as public art, streetscape, residential development, sports, and entertainment.

The impact of a shared experience cannot be underestimated in moving the city's vision forward. The team advises readying several initiatives before the trip and using the energy and unity gained from the experience to advance them upon return to Fort Myers. If it is impossible to arrange a trip, a second and less ideal approach would be to "bring the cities to Fort Myers" by inviting their economic and community leaders to visit. Including a broad set of stakeholders in a virtual visit is another back-up option.

Collective Engagement

Civic and Business Engagement

A consistent characteristic of vibrant, urban communities is an engaged private sector. This ties back to and is built on the shared vision. Engagement of the private sector will include local businesses inside a specific district, representatives of major employers in the market, existing civic groups engaged for this purpose, and new organizations that are established as needed.

Following the Consulting Corps stakeholder interviews, the team observed that the number of private sector entities or individuals that were engaged in Midtown's future was minimal. Critical to the success of the City's vision is that these individuals and groups are established, nurtured, and have an impactful "seat at the table." Without allowing those involved to shape and move the vision forward, it will be futile to expect continued engagement.

Some initial recommendations follow, and examples from other places are included in the Appendix:

1. Develop a Business Improvement District (BID) for Midtown: This is allowed under Florida state law and is a "self-taxing" district for the purpose of economic development. The county or city collects the approved mileage and distributes it to the BID Board of Directors. The funds are used to support the objectives and approved projects of the BID, such as promotion, streetscape improvements, branding, pedestrian and bicycle pathways, etc. A BID would also allow Midtown to focus on the priorities that impact its businesses and property owners.
2. Participate in the Main Street Program: Establishing membership in Main Street America would require a designated coordinator that could be on staff or the establishment of a public/private entity that is financially supported, at least initially, by the city or BID. Membership in this organization opens access to grants, expertise, and economic development programs with a focus on promoting local businesses and using placemaking for economic development. As the district

grows, consider empowering a partner Main Street organization to program activities and promote both Midtown and Downtown.

3. Create a Downtown Development Authority (DDA): The establishment of a DDA district that incorporates Downtown, the waterfront, and Midtown would provide taxing authority and support the goals and objectives of Fort Myers at large. Like a BID in some ways, such an authority can drive the desired growth by providing incentives and funding with more agility than City government.
4. Create a Private Economic Development Organization: This can be a small, City-funded organization that would also pursue grants and business support. This organization can operate as an ombudsman for new businesses and prospective developers. This could also be established as part of the DDA or BID.
5. Cultivate Young Leaders: Engaging new business owners and up-and-coming young leaders is essential to gain buy-in to the City's long-term vision. This organization can be privately led but supported by the City with regular presentations and updates on the City's plans.
6. Leverage nonprofit civic leaders: Engage the region's community development foundation(s) in facilitating and convening partners in support of Midtown's future. Collaboratory has demonstrated leadership and civic commitment to the future of Midtown and has acted as an early first mover by investing in Midtown and making the district their institutional home. Collaboratory serves as a critical anchor in Midtown south of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (MLK) Blvd. and as an important convener of community and business leadership which can be leveraged to build consensus and ultimately attract others to Midtown.



Renovated Railway Depot Provides Office Space for Collaboratory and Other Nonprofit Organizations

Meaningful Connection to Downtown and Adjacent



Neighborhoods

Midtown Connections

Midtown is geographically located adjacent to Downtown and offers significant undeveloped real estate. Due to this proximity, considerable opportunities are possible. An assessment of current usage reveals that approximately 60% of Midtown is dedicated to municipal use, some developed (the police headquarters and state office complex), and others undeveloped (open space, parks, and parking lots).



Current Fort Myers Police Headquarters in Midtown



Undeveloped publicly-owned land in Midtown

Another significant portion is encumbered by the former News Press site, a largely underutilized City of Palms Park baseball stadium complex formerly used as the Boston Red Sox Spring training facility, the Skatium indoor ice rink facility, and outdoor sand volleyball courts. The existing housing stock encompasses both low quality multi-family low-rise and single family structures. There is also a fair number of undeveloped residential lots.



City of Palms Park Baseball Stadium Complex



Former News Press Site



City of Fort Myers Midtown Beach Sports Complex

Against this current backdrop and with the shared vision of a vibrant community, there are various possibilities for connections that can be explored to accelerate growth and further activate Midtown.

PHYSICAL CONNECTIONS

North/South

The City should focus on providing real and exciting north-south connections from Downtown and the waterfront across MLK Blvd. into Midtown. This can be done relatively inexpensively with several visual cues. The City may consider extending the palm trees, brick paver sidewalks and light poles across MLK Blvd. into Midtown. This can be extended up both Hendry Street and Broadway. The challenge of Hendry Street is that it is not a straight extension through Midtown to Edison Avenue due to the location of the state office complex as an obstacle. On the other hand, Broadway can provide a direct linkage from



View of Hendry St. looking south



Sidewalk with pavers and palm trees

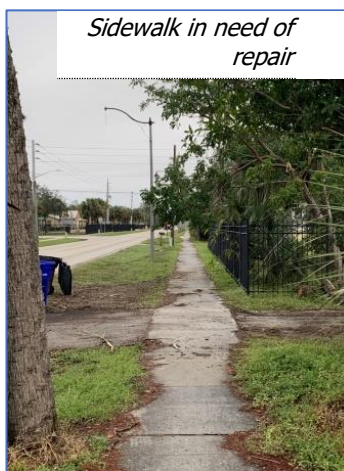
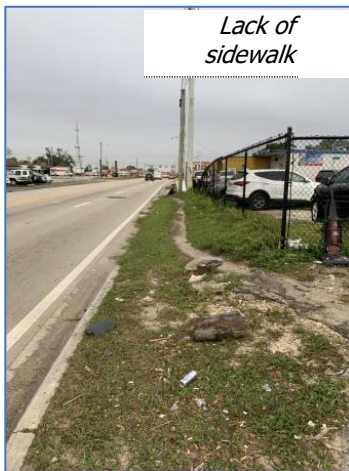


View of Hendry St. looking north

Downtown to Edison Avenue at the corner of City of Palms Park.

Nevertheless, these physical extensions would have real impact towards creating connective view corridors and a sense of “place.” Adding district branding banners on the light poles will help to visually connect and define Midtown. The burying of overhead utilities along MLK Blvd. as a part of any major streetscape improvement projects would serve to visually connect these two districts as well as protect these utility systems from any future severe weather.

Furthermore, the sidewalk along Fowler Street (SR739) at MLK Blvd. should be extended past the News Press site to Edison Avenue. This will provide safe access around the perimeter of Midtown and allow pedestrian and bike mobility. Walking around Midtown, there are sections of existing sidewalk as well as sections with sidewalks in disrepair and some without sidewalks altogether.



East/West

MLK Blvd. is perceived to be a barrier that separates Midtown from Downtown. Several actions could be taken to change this perception. An aggressive suggestion would involve lowering the speed limit and dedicating a portion to a shared use path and adjusting traffic light timing to slow traffic during non-peak hours. This would provide some traffic calming along MLK Blvd. and create less threatening conditions for crossing. This measure would create a more friendly and inviting pedestrian experience. MLK Blvd. is an important gateway thoroughfare which introduces passersby to both the Downtown and Midtown Districts. This artery provides a tremendous opportunity to create visible gateways and attractive district branding to invite travelers along the Boulevard to visit.

Reducing or eliminating automobile access by pedestrianizing streets in Midtown would be counterproductive, but enhancing pedestrian use and access would be highly beneficial. Other traffic calming measures through Midtown could be analyzed as well. These structural changes together with the previous North/South recommendations will go a long way towards making Midtown an attractive, appealing destination.



MLK Blvd. view to the west



MLK Blvd. view to the east

TECHNOLOGICAL CONNECTIVITY

High speed internet availability will attract both commercial and residential development to Midtown. It would also help support an academic and/or innovation campus. If a district-level ultra-high speed broadband hub could be established in the district, it could attract specialty businesses or support an innovation sub-district. This type of connectivity will be a significant driver to high quality development in Midtown.

NEIGHBORHOOD CONNECTIVITY

As Midtown becomes a vibrant community and residents choose to live in Midtown, it will be important to proactively forge strong connections to adjacent neighborhoods including to the south beyond Edison Avenue and east across Fowler Street (SR 739). In particular, it is important to establish strong connections east to the Dunbar residential community given the commercial/industrial zone between Fowler and Evans will be more difficult to bridge. This is another zone where creative pathways with visual connective cues will be important to connect neighborhoods. Streetscape infrastructure including decorative sidewalks, banner programs and potentially curated public art sculpture pathways could serve to create linkages between the two neighborhoods while celebrating the unique nature of each.

Similarly, to the west, creating connections across Cleveland Avenue's (SR41) broad profile, high vehicle traffic and successful commercial activity, while challenging, will be important. As this commercial corridor further develops and the hospital property to the south is redeveloped on the fringe of Midtown, it will be beneficial to connect these two projects to reinforce the importance of these two new activity nodes.



Downtown street pavers along Main Street

DESTINATION CONNECTIVITY

With the right mix of uses, development, and redevelopment in Midtown, Fort Myers could become a magnet destination. This may include the entertainment district mentioned above but could also include a sports tourism district, with softball tournaments, soccer tournaments, and ice hockey training. The Skatium is a high demand facility that could be vastly expanded and become an Olympic training center. Also, the City may consider rebranding Midtown to a more appealing name like Park Centre.

The central location of Midtown makes it an excellent venue for additional entertainment, sports, and wellness activities.

The central location of Midtown makes it an excellent venue for additional entertainment, sports, and wellness activities. The Consulting Corps team proposes shared use path connections from other major activity nodes to Midtown that could draw residents to sports medicine/rehab facilities like a YMCA or pickleball and tennis courts, a dog park, jogging trails, and music venues for events with food trucks.

Collective Vision

Fort Myers lacks a collective vision for Midtown, which is evidenced by the current state of the district and the fragmented approach to planning and execution of a strategy for redevelopment. There is an observable lack of consensus, cooperation, and collaboration as to the future of Midtown, and that permeates through all levels of government, the private sector, and the surrounding communities. Without deliberate and robust engagement from each constituent within the larger Fort Myers community, it will be difficult to establish a community in Midtown.

The beneficiaries of the collective work of reimagining Midtown must have a significant role in making decisions, crafting strategies, and implementing those strategies in order for the plan to be relevant to their needs. It is difficult, if not impossible, to solve a problem if you cannot see it or do not know it exists. That is why it is so important to include diverse populations and communities when solving complex problems. Representation at all phases of decision-making, buy-in from impacted constituents and communities, and proactive consensus-gathering are necessary to the deployment of resources in an efficient and effective way. Ask the question, ‘who is Midtown for?’ in order to develop a wider understanding of who should be part of the decision-making. This must include adjacent neighborhoods and stakeholders. This goes beyond statements of equity, inclusivity, and representation, and forces action. To engage more active participation in decision-making, policy-making, and action steps, stakeholders must:

- Develop a collective vision and ensure that there is universal understanding about what the collective vision is.

- Fully explore that vision through the lens of equity and inclusion and adapt the vision as necessary. Connect adjacent neighborhoods through direct engagement, proactive consensus gathering, and representation in decision-making.
- Be deliberate about inclusivity and solicit not only buy-in, but active leadership within underrepresented communities, neighborhoods, and constituencies. Empower citizens with a seat at the decision-makers' table.

Government

Leadership Development

The City of Fort Myers is advantaged with strong and thoughtful leadership as it continues to advance its future goals, including the activation of the Midtown District. However, it will be important to support existing leadership and to develop new leadership to advance Midtown and other City objectives. In a local area and region that is characterized by significant fragmentation relative to jurisdictional authority and leadership, it is even more important to hold the existing leadership to a higher standard and to develop new leadership that can ensure fulfillment of legacy goals. Broader leadership that is more representative of diverse backgrounds can also benefit municipalities as communities develop and attract more diverse uses, perspectives, and populations.

As discussed earlier, jurisdictions often pull together the local leadership to visit relevant projects in other similar areas of the country. Not only do these “vision tours” break the parochial cycle often adhered to by local leadership, but it allows leaders to explore and be inspired by successful solutions elsewhere alongside their colleagues. These trips foster important relationship building across sectors and jurisdictions of the leadership while stimulating broader thinking to address local problems and issues. In this case, a trip focusing on the development of large key urban sites, water supply solutions, waterfront development, sports/stadium programming, headquarters/business attraction, corridor development and other issues in wider markets could support the leadership to act as more informed and educated decision-makers when addressing the activation of Midtown.

Further, as leadership confronts more complex and complicated issues, it is important to arm leaders with knowledge, inspiration, and education in order to support decision-making. Educational workshops in the area of basic development finance evaluation, development incentives, construction means and methods, public/private partnerships, and other areas could provide leadership with the tools to support more innovative plans, sound evaluation, and applied judgment.

Fort Myers' stakeholders should also draw on the existing knowledge base of residents. Given the large number of local retirees who likely have significant amounts of expertise, it is important to try to involve these residents and their experience in support of local government and civic goals, even if they are seasonal. This level of involvement may even cause seasonal residents to have a stronger connection to

the region and its civic efforts, possibly thereby causing them to extend their annual tenure in the area and other benefits.

Further, it is important to develop leadership in residents at a young age through involving youth in plan development and decision-making and potentially implementing a civics curriculum in the local school system. Promoting involvement from both younger and older members of the region in local civic organizations is another way to engage local residents in civic efforts.

Government Restructuring

It is important that the structure of local government reflects the current primary goals of the municipality and the particular moment in time of the city's development. Given Fort Myers' significant growth during the last decade and its current intention to encourage planned and balanced growth in the future, the team believes that the structure of government should be refocused to guide and drive this growth. Further, there are significant issues that the Consulting Corps observes in Fort Myers' Downtown development culture could be addressed through governance changes that will better ensure a system of checks and balances, transparency, and rigor throughout the development approvals and incentives process.

A first step would be the higher prioritization of the urban planning and housing function within the municipal government structure. The Consulting Corps suggests that the City consider restructuring the separate functions within the Community Development Department into new cabinet-level departments in the following manner:

1. Building/Code Enforcement Department (including Utilities functions)
2. Planning Department
3. Housing Department

Through the appointment of "cabinet-level" department directors, the anticipated future Downtown commercial and housing development activity could be better coordinated and vetted from all government perspectives. This preemptive prioritization of functions will allow Fort Myers more proactively to fulfill the City's goals through development of more rigorous but streamlined planning and development review and approvals processes.

Further, the team observed a Downtown redevelopment incentive and approval culture which the team believes is limiting competition from the broader local and national development community and which has significantly limited redevelopment in the Downtown area. The City will benefit from a much higher level of competition from developers and more rigorous developer/owner vetting to ensure that owners plan to develop expeditiously and are financially capable of delivering projects successfully.

For these reasons, the Consulting Corps recommends a review of the approval procedures and governance structure of the Fort Myers Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA), a separate entity which oversees redevelopment efforts in 12 redevelopment areas. To best utilize and control the very valuable incentives that the CRA issues, the CRA should engage in much more rigorous underwriting and oversight of potential projects against initial approvals, schedule, and budgets, at both the staff and CRA Board levels. If this capacity is not available or possible at the staff level, then outside expertise should be engaged.

This increased acuity and oversight could support the creation of specific CRA policies to ensure that projects and owners are viable, capable, and have the financial capacity—and the will—to successfully complete projects on time and in accordance with approved budgets. There should be specific controls that prohibit the extension of development schedules (unless subject to very limited and specific issues), and the assignment of any approved incentives should be precluded upon the trading or sale of any property. Also, the lack of adherence to these controls in the past has significantly limited Downtown development and has created very negative precedents for owner/ developer behavior. The Consulting Corps recommends that the City order an audit of all outstanding, approved but untriggered, TIF incentives to determine whether cancellation or clawbacks are possible and appropriate according to contract terms.

Further, to enhance controls, increase transparency, and ensure successful completion of projects, the team recommends that an independent CRA board be established, or that the existing CRA Advisory Board be elevated in responsibility and stature. The CRA was converted from an independent special district to a “Dependent Special District” in 1988, and the City of Fort Myers City Council and Mayoral roles were established as the new board. An independent, empowered board would serve as an additional level of financial acuity and oversight that could be staffed with local professionals to provide much more evaluative strength at the Board level. The City Council and Mayor could still be engaged in the approval process when CRA Board approvals are considered before City Council for ratification.

Need for Early Successes

As part of the activation of the Midtown District, it will be important to have some early, highly visible successes. These early efforts start building momentum for future activity and development, grow support and a sense of belonging for all stakeholders, and manage expectations as the District develops along a reasonable and thoughtful timeframe.

Further, early projects demonstrate the City’s ability to guide successful processes, programming, and projects which is important to build confidence within the existing larger community and with future developers, residents, and investors interested in engaging in the Midtown area.

Lastly, early projects can potentially provide interim revenues to fund further activation in the area, creating value as the activation and development progresses. Examples of potential early projects with high probability for success are discussed later in this report.

Land Use

Currently, Midtown has a mix of zoning and uses. An important reality is that approximately 60% of the area is governmental or institutionally owned. This is a factor when considering future development and redevelopment opportunities. With political will, the City can take action to reposition municipal real estate ownership and uses. For example, the location of the police station may involve a decision tree of drivers and needs that balances the potential benefits of a police headquarters location outside of Midtown with the opportunity of more developable land in Midtown for new urban development.

Furthermore, the City may find it beneficial or necessary to exercise eminent domain to acquire property. Inevitably, that action has many considerations and possible consequences. Moreover, eminent domain can only be used for a public purpose, and relocating municipal buildings may face some obstacles. Therefore, the approach and strategy necessitates careful execution. The overarching consideration is a deliberate plan.

The City may need to consider amendments to the zoning code to accommodate and incentivize targeted desirable development in Midtown. The form-based code currently utilized in Downtown could be analyzed for applicability to some or all of Midtown. Other statutory revisions and processes like the introduction of special districts (e.g., entertainment, sports, innovation, etc.) could be adopted to drive intended outcomes and incentivize development behavior.

There may be competing visions and plans but ultimately, the City should strive for a development plan that utilizes property to its highest and best use.

Fundamental to the activation of Midtown is the adoption of a comprehensive plan that reflects community goals and market reality. There may be competing visions and plans but ultimately, the City should strive for a development plan that utilizes property to its highest and best use. This determination of what is best may be qualitative and not quantitative. Dedicating portions of property to open space and parks may reduce tax revenue but may be critical to creating a place which anchors a vibrant community. These decisions should be controlled through the zoning framework and processes.

Economic Development

Regional Organization

Unlike its peer cities around the country and within Florida, Fort Myers, does not have a regional economic development authority. (See entities like JAXUSA in Jacksonville, FL; Miami-Beacon Council in the Miami Area; the Orlando Economic Partnership in the Orlando area; and the Tampa Bay Economic Council in the Tampa Bay Area.) Economic development requires regional collaboration. Even with the economic development efforts of the City of Fort Myers and Lee County, both entities, along with the region, should have a regional economic development organization that focuses on business development.

Economic development requires regional collaboration.

A regional entity could promote the assets, strengths, and identity of the region while working with the local economic development organizations. Assets in Fort Myers, such as the Midtown area, could be promoted via the regional economic development organization to a national audience for business development. The regional entity would not replace the local entities but would work with the local economic development organizations. The new economic development organization would be a partnership between the business community and the public sector, with a governing board and investors from both sectors.

The seed funding for the proposed entity could come from American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) dollars. The seed funding could be used to craft a regional economic development strategy and fund staffing, including a chief operating officer for the organization. The organization could be tasked with engaging corporate site selectors, real estate professionals, and economic development practitioners from around the world.

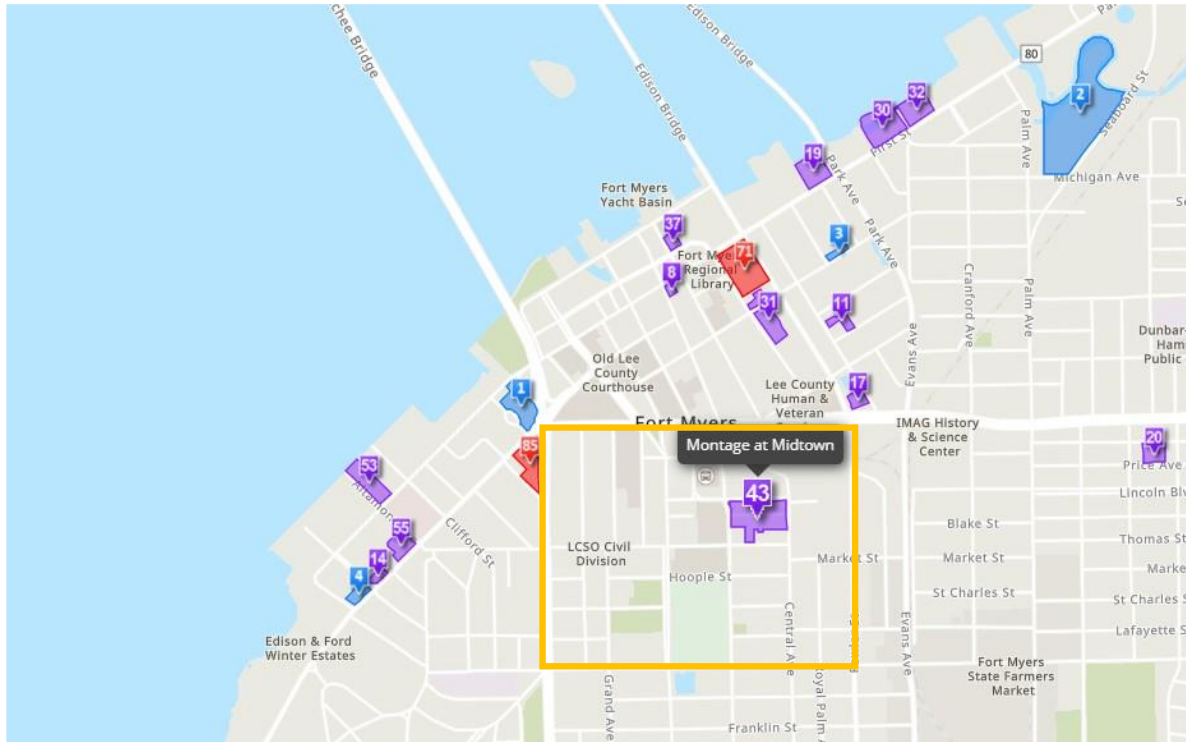
Economic Development Tools

The Economic Development entities for Fort Myers and Lee County could enhance their toolbox with New Markets Tax Credits (NMTC), Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) for economic development, and U.S. Dept. of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Section 108 Loan Guarantee Loan Program. Additionally, remaining ARPA funds can be reallocated for economic development purposes such as workforce development for underserved populations along with supporting small businesses in distressed census tracts.

Eligible uses of ARPA funds include economic development and workforce development in qualified census tracts according to the U.S. Department of Treasury. The City of Fort Myers may also consider

creating a tax abatement program to support economic development in the same distressed areas of the City. The tax abatement program could focus on capital investment requirements and job creation and retention activities, including a quality jobs creation component.

TIF Reform



Development Approvals/Tax Increment Financing in Midtown

The Fort Myers CRA oversees the tax increment financing (TIF) program which is primarily controlled by a few individuals. Additionally, it appears that requests for TIF assistance are not rigorously evaluated on the front end nor are well monitored throughout the development approval process until the close of a project. Several steps can be taken to strengthen the tool, increase public benefit, improve transparency (from application intake to approval), and ensure the resources committed are justified.

First, the CRA board should be comprised of outside experts with a background in real estate, legal, architecture, and public policy. Next, consider forming an economic development and housing committee for the Council to focus efforts on these priorities. Develop a series of TIF 101-level workshops for the CRA board and Council to broaden the knowledge and experience of these decision-makers.

Some additional steps could include the requirement of a preliminary meeting with CRA staff to discuss a proposed project and the TIF application process. If CRA staff deems the project viable, staff provides a TIF application. The next steps should proceed as follows:

1. Staff reviews TIF application for completeness.
2. Staff conducts economic and fiscal impact analysis along with project return analysis (using fiscal and economic impact models).
3. A third-party underwriter with a wealth of experience in evaluating all aspects of the application should be utilized to review transactions.
4. Planning staff reviews design (all projects should be evaluated for alignment with design standards).
5. If the project passes all previous steps, CRA staff drafts a term sheet with economic and community benefits tied to the project along with investment requirements and fixed timelines for final project delivery.
6. Project proceeds to the CRA advisory board for review. (The advisory board reviews for alignment with policy and economic guidelines.)
7. If the advisory board recommends the project, the item can proceed to the CRA board for review.
8. CRA board then approves the project, and it moves forward to Council for the final vote.
9. Monitor project planning and delivery. Consider the development of compliance and monitoring platform for all TIF development agreements.

An example of a city that has updated its TIF policies is Austin, Texas, which requires all residential developments that receive TIF assistance to set aside 20% of the units as attainable housing. Dallas and San Antonio, Texas, have similar requirements.

Based on stakeholder input and effective policies in similar cities, the team recommends consideration of the following policy changes:

1. DBE percentage could be increased to 20% versus 10%.
2. Local small businesses should be involved in the process and 10% of the total budget needs to be supported by local small businesses.
3. Create a small-scale TIF program to support small businesses (less than 25 employees and \$500K in revenues annually) and a program to support neighborhood residential development.
4. TIF policy could require 20% of the units to provide attainable housing versus 10% (attainable range from 60% to 120% of Area Median Income). TIF requests for residential development that do not include attainable housing would be denied. Additionally:
 - Affordable units must be distributed geographically and by unit size.
 - All units must share the same amenities.

The executive director for the CRA should be empowered, and the staff should be trained via economic development entities such as the National Development Council (NDC), the International Economic Development Council (IEDC), and the Council of Development Finance Agencies (CDFA). Additional

resources should be allocated for adding staff to the CRA as appropriate. Funding for the CRA could come from the administrative fees associated with the various TIF districts. A standard 15% administrative fee should be applied to all districts to support the operations of the CRA and management of the TIF program.

Government Funding

Due to the impacts of Hurricane Ian in 2022, the City of Fort Myers and Lee County, Florida, will receive an allocation of Community Development Block Grant Disaster Recovery (CDBG-DR) funds. These funds can be used for the following activities: affordable housing redevelopment, public facilities, supporting public services, planning activities, public infrastructure, real estate development activities, and economic development. These funds could also be utilized for the redevelopment of the Midtown area and the Dunbar community. It is critical that the City of Fort Myers becomes fully engaged in the submittal process to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to best attract and utilize these and other funding sources to help support the future activation of Midtown.

Housing

Journey to Work

The components to successful community revitalization include a broad cross-section of the larger city, including commerce, economic opportunity, housing options, and cultural and educational resources. Communities rarely exist as a concentration of homogeneous uses, economic cohorts, or demographic groups. Currently, the makeup of Midtown and the surrounding neighborhoods that influence Midtown lack the diversity of use and vibrancy required to serve as a catalyst for redevelopment.

According to Census Bureau journey-to-work data, not a single person both lives and works in Midtown. All residents who currently live in the district travel outside of the neighborhood for work, and all jobs in



Rosa Parks Transportation Facility

the district are held by out-of-district residents. A total of 822 residents travel into Midtown from elsewhere, and 187 residents leave Midtown to find work in other jurisdictions. In order for Midtown to be a vibrant community, that must change. Communities require full time residents, robust services, job opportunities, and cultural

resources. Each of these elements contributes to a functioning community, and leaders can encourage housing, services, activities, and businesses such that the market responds with investments that enhance the community.

The workflow patterns of Midtown are not unique to the district but are observable in the City of Fort Myers for both primary job holders and all workers, with important distinctions between the two. In the City of Fort Myers, a total of 20,385 residents leave the City for primary work, while 36,068 residents work in Fort Myers and live elsewhere, and 4,583 residents live and work in the City for their primary work. Nearly 60% of the labor force of the City of Fort Myers live outside of the City and commute into the City for their primary work. This relationship is exaggerated with the analysis of all jobs, both primary and secondary (temporary, part time, etc.) where a total of 23,672 residents leave the City for all work, while 60,135 residents work in Fort Myers and live elsewhere, and 7,804 residents live and work in the City for both primary and secondary jobs.

More than 65% of all jobs in the City of Fort Myers are held by workers commuting from outside of the City. This represents a significant transitory population, and commuting patterns reinforce that relationship. According to Census data, 22% of all workers employed in the City of Fort Myers live in Cape Coral, with 12.7% living in Lehigh Acres, and only 11.5% live in the City of Fort Myers. This indicates a significant commuting burden for the majority of workers employed within Fort Myers. Additionally, Fort Myers residents reported an average travel time to work of 24 minutes with more than 32% of residents traveling more than 30 minutes to work, each direction.

Housing Attainability

The most common measure of housing affordability is the percent of income that households spend on housing costs. According to most federal and state agencies, households that spend more than 30% of income on housing costs are “cost burdened.” Households that spend more than 50% of income on housing are “severely cost burdened.” Areas where more than 30% of households are cost burdened face an affordable housing shortage. In Fort Myers, 52.3% of renter households are cost burdened and 27.1% of renter households are severely cost burdened. Cost burden rates are typically higher among renter households; however, the reality that half of the residents of the City are paying more than 30% of their income towards housing, and more than a quarter of households are paying half their income towards housing costs is remarkable and unsustainable.

This economic opportunity void in Fort Myers and Midtown is a burden to recovery and revitalization. Efforts need to be made to diversify the existing land use within Midtown and to expand the economic base, opportunities for employment and entrepreneurship, housing alternatives at all income cohorts, and cultural connections to the community. Access to housing is a barrier to new job growth within the region and Midtown. The business community indicated that their number one challenge in attracting

talent is lack of housing for the workforce. Specific action steps for building more active participation should include:

- Prioritize the preservation and creation of diverse housing types and tenures, including attainable housing for the workforce.
- Encourage the construction of workforce housing where the workforce needs to be, rather than importing labor from afar across an already-stressed transportation system. Reduce barriers to transportation linkages and prioritize transportation infrastructure.

Housing Development

Housing is essential to economic sustainability. Without decent, comfortable housing that is affordable to all gradients of income cohorts, it is difficult, if not impossible to maintain and grow an effective and responsive economy. Maintaining and expanding housing requires deliberate leadership to preserve and improve the existing supply and create additional options within the community.

In economic growth there is always compromise, what is given away to achieve the benefits of a robust economy. Growth throws off tremendously powerful positives, but there are negatives that need to be recognized, understood, and managed. One of the negatives is that economic growth makes housing less affordable, across the spectrum. For some people that is not a problem; for others, it is the most basic and pressing problem of their lives. That is why it is so critical to understand the realities of the housing economy and make meaningful and measurable progress towards enhancing opportunities for housing that meets the demands of the workforce, upon which economic growth relies. Otherwise, the neighborhood, community, and city cannot grow.

Perhaps the greatest problem that needs to be solved in Midtown, Fort Myers, and the region is the need to create a strategy for increasing housing in a variety of types, tenures, and price points to support a growing economy. This should be the primary focus as local leadership drafts Fort Myers' redevelopment strategy.

MARKET RATE HOUSING

Generally speaking, there is an active and engaged local market for unrestricted market rate housing in both rental and ownership tenures. Recently completed luxury multifamily rental and condominium projects are evidence that there is an appetite for additional supply within the market from consumers and developers alike. How the city of Fort Myers reacts to those proposals, whether through the existing TIF mechanisms, or other public policy tools, will shape and enhance the community within Midtown. As discussed elsewhere in this report, what is fundamentally certain is that the process and procedure for evaluating TIF applications and awarding taxpayer financing needs to be evaluated, restructured, and formalized to include tests of reasonableness, underwriting, and ongoing compliance. When spending taxpayer money, it is essential that the community receive commensurate benefit.

WORKFORCE HOUSING

The most pressing and ongoing housing challenge that Midtown faces is providing housing to meet the needs of the workforce. As previously discussed within this report, no current residents of Midtown are employed within the district, and all jobs within Midtown are held by workers living outside of the district. Housing options for a wider variety of income cohorts and social makeups will bring vibrancy and a robustness to the community and economy. The district needs a permanent tenancy in order to be a vibrant and engaging place. Daytime workers, tourists and travelers, part-time residents, and full-time residents of all age groups can share use of the district and contribute to the community. The City of Fort Myers must leverage private investment to achieve workforce housing goals within the district, including, but not limited to:

- Adopt Inclusionary Zoning requirements for new projects that set aside a portion of developed units as restricted, affordable, attainable, or otherwise reserved for residents earning between 30% and 120% of Area Median Income (AMI). These units should be legally restricted and regulated as permanently attainable units and monitored on a regular basis. The Housing Authority is a likely candidate to provide technical guidance and monitoring assistance and should be consulted in developing regulations.
- Require affordability set-asides for all projects receiving public financing, subsidy, or taxpayer money, especially for projects that receive TIF. The requirement should mandate that a portion of developed units will be restricted as affordable, attainable, or otherwise reserved for residents earning between 30% and 120% of Area Median Income (AMI) for at least the term of the TIF agreement, if not longer. These units should be legally restricted and regulated as permanently attainable units and monitored on a regular basis. Formal auditing, and not self-certification, should be required.
- Align interests with costs and benefits. The terms of TIF benefits must align with the priorities of the City and County. What's given away must be returned in equal or greater measure, otherwise taxpayer money is squandered. If the TIF benefits are given over 20 years, the attainable housing set-aside term must be equal or greater than 20 years.
- Establish policies for regulating the tenure and tenancy of new residential projects such that new housing options are available for a broader tenancy, rather than concentrated in part-time seasonal or senior residences. Including workforce housing, mixed-income housing, and mixed-use developments will enhance the community.
- Consideration of Accessory Dwelling Unit (ADU) zoning, local building regulation modifications, and expedited housing entitlement and construction should be made to increase the flexibility and nimbleness of the housing economy, which reduces the social and financial burden on communities, businesses, and the local and regional administration and economy.

- A mechanism for tracking data, filtering inputs, and responding to redevelopment and rebuild proposals will be an essential tool in identifying, understanding, and responding to overarching themes and reducing future risk to housing stakeholders.

STUDENT HOUSING

Post-secondary educational institutions that offer housing to students, both at the undergraduate and graduate levels, provide an opportunity to enhance the socio-economic makeup of the Midtown district. Student housing is a component to a dynamic housing system and fosters diverse residents (economically, socially, demographically). There is opportunity to bring a college campus into Midtown or Downtown through cooperation with regional colleges, universities, private academic programs and other institutions. The City should investigate opportunities to create partnerships and create the conditions to provide for student housing within Midtown and explore the potential for state resources to assist with student housing.

Site Opportunities

Sports as a Driver in Midtown

A primary goal for development and redevelopment in Midtown should be maximizing the highest and best use of the real estate. That said, there are currently two significant facilities that are dedicated to sports business. The first is the underutilized City of Palms Park baseball stadium complex (prior spring training facility for the Boston Red Sox and more recently used by Florida SouthWestern State College (FSW)), and the second is the Skatium indoor ice and roller rink complex. An active outdoor volleyball facility also exists.

There has been much discussion and study focused on the use or re-use of the baseball stadium complex and Skatium facility. Part of reaching a shared vision for Midtown is garnering consensus on the future of these facilities. A question that must be answered is whether sports can be a significant driver and a catalyst for the activation of Midtown and whether sports is an important part of the future identity and activity of this area of Fort Myers. It is important that leadership make a bold decision soon to address this issue, keeping in mind that there are both tangible economic and intangible activation benefits to be considered. Recommended action steps regarding these facilities are presented later in this document.



City of Palms Park Baseball Stadium Complex

BASEBALL

The City of Palms Park is a monument to significant past sports activity in Midtown. Opportunities to redevelop the ballpark have been largely unsuccessful. This lack of success is most likely due to lack of shared vision and resourcing from City leaders. The FSW baseball program has developed its own baseball stadium on campus, so this opportunity has passed. The ballpark is no longer considered a valuable asset to the Lee County Parks and Recreation Department.

It is clearly questionable whether the ballpark can be re-utilized for a baseball related purpose. The answer will be clearer when additional focused market study, facility use plans and facility condition/renovation cost estimates and updates are completed. The decision to demolish this facility should not be made without careful consideration of the value of this built asset and potential future use if the proper investment of financial and leadership resources is made. While it is very important to cover the ongoing costs of operating and renovating the facility, there may be other short- or long-term intangible benefits that should be considered. However, leadership must make an informed decision in order to steward its resources by either preserving this asset or using the resources currently directed to the asset for other purposes, thereby freeing up the land under the complex for future development. A consideration may be to use the facility in the short-term (with proper resource support) but consider alternative development in the future as the site's development attractiveness increases, the land value rises or City priorities shift.

A market study evaluating the venue and sports demand for baseball, softball, lacrosse, soccer, tennis or pickleball (professional, collegiate, or recreational) are all possibilities. A broader lens may consider alternative uses for the facility (in lieu of demolition) as the center of an entertainment district which could include a music venue, craft beer festivals, food trucks, and the like. Ultimately, the success of any activity will be driven by the number of people and resources that can be attracted to the facility. Specific recommendations for the stadium are presented later in this report.

ICE SKATING

The Skatium, on the other hand, appears to be moderately successful. Based on the team's onsite interviews, there is high demand for ice time and particular opportunity to grow women's hockey. A public private partnership to explore an investment in expansion and remodeling may be well warranted. Private sector sponsorship and support should be pursued to support expansion and to raise the profile and awareness of this facility. Academic and institutional partners should also be engaged to broaden programming and to invite more communities. There is sufficient land to expand to the rear of the property and replace the existing roller-skating rink with another sheet of ice. With broader leadership and support, and perhaps appropriate City incentives, this facility could be a regionally-important destination which would enhance local sports programming and related sports tourism.

VOLLEYBALL

Currently, there is a small number of volleyball courts, and they are highly utilized. The City should consider ways to assess the demand and determine if expansion of the facilities would drive further interest. This sport also attracts a younger set to the area and may serve to broaden the demographic group that could be attracted to live in Midtown. This could potentially be the third leg of the stool for the sports engine in Midtown. This type of expanded low impact use could also serve as a temporary or interim use prior to future more permanent development.

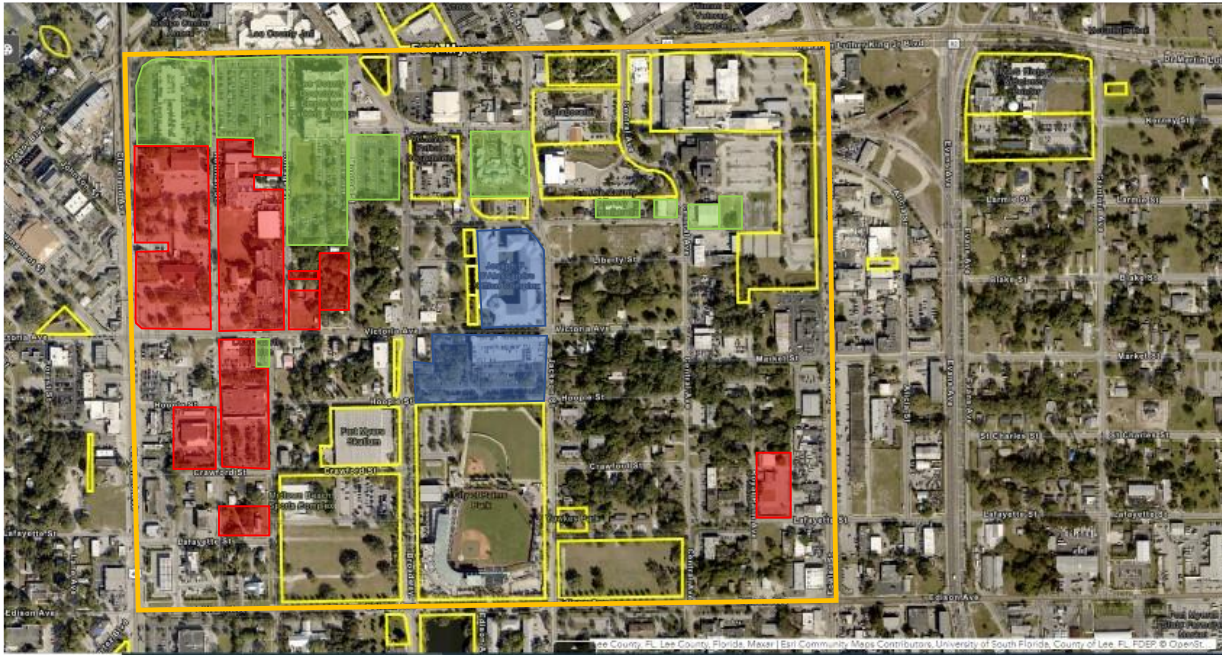
SPORTS TOURISM

Sports tourism is a critical component for economic development in many cities across the U.S. Fort Myers has several important advantages including its geographic location (proximity to beaches and other Florida attractions) and mild climate. As noted earlier, Midtown currently has several sports components with varying levels of success that could be expanded to take advantage of the potential economic spin-off benefits of sports activities and tournaments including spectator and participant purchases and hotel room nights. Also, parents and families following participants in youth sporting activities and traveling teams create significant related economic development benefits as well.

In the end, any decision to recruit and support sports activity to Midtown will need to be analyzed in comparison to alternative uses. There may be an appetite to incentivize and support sports business activity in the area based on cost, community benefit, and demand. There may also be an opportunity to explore shared-use facilities (i.e., repurpose and renovate the existing ballpark facility) and introduce complementary activities, such as a music venue, pickleball, food trucks, a dog park, wellness services, and the like. The office component of the stadium complex may also house other types of activities after renovation.

Institutional Ownership

Government functions in urban areas are important for the accessible provision of public services and they often serve as significant traffic generators to attract residences and to support other urban commercial establishments. However, government and some institutional uses can have adverse impacts on the energy of a city. A city characterized by higher levels of government and institutional activity can potentially draw non-complementary activities to urban centers, create evening/weekend dead zones in commercial districts due to their typical 9am-5pm activity incidence, and lead to other effects that are not always supportive to the development of vibrancy in a community.



Government and Institutional Ownership in Midtown

The team observes that the Midtown District has over 60% government or institutional ownership. The Downtown also has a very high level of government departmental presence clustered in the center of Downtown and flanking MLK Blvd. The presence of such a significant amount of government functions and activities also has caused the need for several large, government-owned parking lots, which provide off-hours benefits to other city uses that rely on parking, but which create monolithic structures and underutilized areas that lack activity and, in many instances, do not promote connectivity.

The City of Fort Myers, Lee County and State of Florida all have very large structures in the Downtown and Midtown areas. The Downtown is home to the expansive Lee County court system and jail, and Departments of Human and Veteran Services, Public Works, Human Services, Tax Collection, and other administrative services. Fort Myers also has its City Hall and several administrative annex buildings Downtown, as well as prominent public safety facilities in the north Midtown area. There is a large U.S. Courthouse and Federal Building, and other low-activity institutions, including the American Legion Post



State of Florida Office Building in Midtown

and Florida Power & Light among others. A large State of Florida building housing the Department of Children and Families and the Department of Environmental Health, and its large, structured parking garage lie at the very heart of the Midtown District.

The Consulting Corps encourages the City, County, and State government leadership to evaluate and audit all departmental functions for their dependence upon a Downtown/Midtown location and the appropriateness of function to the aspirational image of Fort Myers. Many of the functions above do not necessarily rely upon a Downtown location. In most cities, City departments would not be able to afford or justify the high price of centrally located land. Further, some of these functions may be better positioned in the outlying neighborhoods near target populations, or in more accessible areas which would better support their operations. Many public facilities could be more efficiently and effectively located in areas where land values may allow for more horizontally oriented, larger footprint facilities with more on-site parking.

It is important to reserve space in Downtown government facilities for specific departments that are more complementary to Downtown and Midtown activities. Particularly where there are large concentrations of government functions that drain vibrancy from a zone, consider alternative locations for these functions or determine other mechanisms to draw Downtown or Midtown visitors through and beyond these uses to establish and enliven active connective corridors.

In addition, if there are key alternative uses for Downtown and Midtown spaces, or if spaces currently occupied by government are uniquely positioned to serve larger goals, consider building consensus around potentially relocating these functions, make difficult decisions that may not be universally accepted, then plan the repurposing of vacated Downtown space to support larger goals. The Consulting Corps includes a few specific relocation opportunities later in the report.

If spaces currently occupied by government are uniquely positioned to serve larger goals, consider building consensus around potentially relocating these functions, make difficult decisions that may not be universally accepted, then plan the repurposing of vacated Downtown space to support larger goals.

Arts and Culture

Fort Myers has historically supported the arts: performing arts, public art, galleries, and museums. Studies repeatedly prove that a vibrant arts culture is catalytic—contributing to placemaking, brand identity, the economy, and even innovation. The Midtown District offers an opportunity to provide for future public art and performing art locations as it builds its future. The arts scene of Midtown will be most impactful if it is woven into the vision, brand, and planning as new development moves into this area.

Located between the Alliance for the Arts Center and the Sidney & Berne Davis Art Center, Midtown is positioned to leverage these existing venues as a catalyst in the development and growth of the district by identifying what is missing in the offerings of the city and region. The team identified several opportunities that deserve further investigation and incorporation into the infrastructure of Midtown.



A large, outdoor amphitheater for music and live performances could position this district as a regional destination and leverage the beautiful weather of Fort Myers and the large population of residents and visitors looking for entertainment. The strategic location between the larger markets of Tampa and Miami can allow for the capture of bands and performers traveling mid-week between these two traditional entertainment centers. The riverfront and Alliance Center amphitheaters, both well attended, meet the needs of smaller size performances and specific stage configurations. An additional amphitheater could be an adaptive use of the existing stadium. Make it unique by creating a food-centric open-air venue that allows regular “season tableholders” to bring their own al fresco meals, candles, and decorations.

Incorporating public art on institutional properties throughout the district can “warm” these sterile, more functional structures to become additive to the district instead of intrusive. Murals, creative seating, sidewalk and crosswalk art, sculptures, and lighting standards can connect places and promote the brand of Midtown.

Demonstrating excellent planning, the City allocates a percentage for the arts within all new developments. The team recommends that this be expanded to include all public investments and renovations. Building this designated source of revenue, using and enforcing it to implement this ambitious measure, can propel Midtown’s growth and the quality and vibrancy of its development.

Public Green Space and Waterfront

In recent years, there has been an emphasis on the pedestrian experience of the public realm and the importance of gathering spaces and activated places. Cities are well advised to embrace their roles as “asset managers” of these connecting spaces, for the quality of these spaces and how they are managed, maintained, and programmed profoundly impact the communities and properties they connect. All the branding and advertising in the world cannot do what a well-tended public realm can do for vitality and growth.

Fort Myers’ Downtown waterfront is an irreplaceable asset. While not directly adjacent to Midtown, its activation impacts the surrounding communities in a remarkable way. The Consulting Corps recommends that, as the City engages a new harbormaster and invests in post-hurricane repairs, attention is spent on maximizing the public access to and engagement of the waterfront—and then connecting it to nearby Midtown and surrounding communities.



Public plaza at Hendry St. and Edwards Dr.

Development in the waterfront space should not take away from the public experience but be additive. Encourage outdoor seating for restaurants and casual eateries and maintain the height of new buildings to complement and celebrate the visual access to historic buildings throughout the Downtown. Set design standards that establish cohesiveness in the area as an identifiable “place” but with flexibility to allow serendipity without appearing too contrived.

Fort Myers has an authentic and intact Downtown—one unique to the patterns and styles of Florida in years past. It is critical to leverage this legacy as new development occurs.

The waterfront is an ultimate pedestrian destination, somewhat like Central Park is to New York—it should be “place central” to all communities within walking distance. Midtown’s proximity to an activated and vibrant waterfront gives it power and draw. Connecting Downtown, the waterfront, and Midtown for pedestrians and cyclists, residents and visitors, businesses and shops will make all these places more meaningful and impactful at the center of Fort Myers.

Walkability is essential to a vibrant urban neighborhood. This is where the City plays a critical role in creating the type of connectivity that leverages all its assets, such as sidewalks, streets, green space, and unique defining assets, such as the waterfront.

Within Midtown, this means leading development by establishing pedestrian-scaled streets and sidewalks with an eye to placemaking. Creating small venues such as pocket parks, a corner store, shaded streets, and facilitating innovative design can all work together to establish the “place” of Midtown, separate and unique to surrounding communities yet an essential element to Fort Myers as a whole. Capture opportunities when public assets are traded to keep pockets of public green space and require new developments to invest in significant streetscape improvements that serve the greater community.

Greenspaces are essential to the health of any community. This is where people of differing backgrounds, ages, education, and incomes can share experiences and build relationships. Nothing connects us like shared experiences. This engagement across incomes and cultures is what makes a community vibrant and healthy – economically and socially.

Innovation Convening Center

Fort Myers and Lee County have a high-potential civic-oriented business leadership within their boundaries. If one looks a bit further to the south and north to the larger Greater Southwest Florida region, it is an area that will continue to have huge growth in commercial businesses. Given the attractiveness of the area with its mild weather and beaches, the region already attracts more than its fair share of corporate leaders as tourists and as seasonal residents. Further, the exceptional growth in the housing market will continue to attract additional population at the mid- to upper-income levels, and hopefully, at the workforce housing level. This strong commercial market and a growing population will continue momentum for much larger economic growth in the region.

With this growth in mind, the team believes that there is a tremendous opportunity to create and brand an innovation center in the Midtown area, where academia, business, and angel investors could convene to spur innovative products, academic feeder programs, and new enterprises. The Edison Awards platform, which is based in Fort Myers, is a globally recognized leader in fostering innovation through its annual innovation competition. Each year, more than 150 companies from all over the world submit competition entries in a hope to validate their innovative products and processes.

The Edison Awards would be a perfect partner in a year-round innovation center of this type, which could bring together partners and help to brand Midtown by developing and marketing programming, events, and hosting its annual international competition. These efforts could further boost local economic development as the Center and Edison Awards Competition brings leading-edge companies to the area which will introduce them to all the opportunities Fort Myers and Lee County have to offer.

Campus Development

ACADEMIC

One notable factor in the Fort Myers Downtown and Midtown areas is a lack of academic institutional presence. Unlike other types of institutions, there are many benefits associated with tertiary educational institutions establishing facilities and campuses in Downtown locations. Academic institutions bring young people to urban areas and often provide lifelong learning opportunities which are beneficial to other populations, including those seeking professional continuing education, for midlife career-changers, retirees, and seniors. Academic facilities can also make spaces and programs available to the general public which may draw new populations to the area. Further, academic institutions are known for attracting commercial development to service student populations and others who use academic facilities.

Oftentimes young students may prefer to live in more vibrant, Downtown areas with more cultural and entertainment options. If academic programs are Downtown or nearby, it may provide a boost to Downtown residential markets. The location of academic institutions in downtown areas also can support the construction and occupancy of student housing. While most of the existing local public programs do not have a large on-campus residential population, the availability of Downtown or Midtown residential opportunities near academic programs could provide a unique differentiating attractor for specific programs. Further, there are several other quasi-public or private learning-oriented institutions that may have existing residential programs that could also draw energy and activity Downtown.

Many municipalities build strong partnerships with local academic institutions to consider using underutilized facilities. For instance, Florida SouthWestern State College (FSW) utilized the City of Palms Park in Midtown for its baseball programs prior to building its own facility on campus in southern Lee County. Along with the stadium and the adjacent Skatium, these academic facilities could continue to attract academic partnerships, and could even open the door to bring new academic facilities or mini campuses to the area. When discussing possibilities of opening campuses Downtown with one of the area academic institutions, representatives indicated an interest in relocating specific programs closer to, if not in, Midtown, particularly if they also could accommodate sports programs. Fort Myers should look to strengthen its academic partnerships to see if this type of demand may exist and may serve the goals of Fort Myers.

MEDICAL

Another interesting possibility, given the highly visible and successful medical and nursing programs in the area, is to consider developing a medical innovation campus with academic, institutional, and private partners. Particularly with such strong local medical-related programs and the presence of Lee Memorial Hospital (and potential reuse of the US41 facility nearby), Midtown could provide an attractive location for this type of facility. Further, innovative companies in Fort Myers and Lee County like NeoGenomics

and others may have a strong interest in sponsoring academic programs in order to develop locally grown future employees for future research and development opportunities and more generally to foster medical innovation and commercialization as a specialty in the larger region.

Infrastructure

Water Predictability

The primary infrastructure challenge for Fort Myers is a rapidly growing population that places demand on services. One of the primary services is providing adequate water for drinking and fire suppression. Recently, the Lee County Health Department relinquished its oversight role back to the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (DEP). Given the City's rapid growth, the City has not planned and developed adequate water production facilities including drilling for water capacity and treatment for water quality. As a result, the City is currently under a Consent Decree with the DEP, which outlines what the City must achieve to comply with state mandates.

Of concern is the cost of providing an adequate water supply (an additional approx. \$15-20M investment) and the impact on future real estate development. The immediate impact on real estate development is that the DEP will only issue dry line permits for approved development. These approved developments cannot obtain a certificate of occupancy to initiate flow to the water lines until the City has complied with the Consent Order.

This unusual situation may reveal a broader issue related to the City's reactive approach to planning and development. It would be beneficial for the City to become more proactive and seek assistance from DEP in identifying and applying for grants that help fund water infrastructure. For instance, DEP's Division of Water Restoration Assistance handles grants and loans to assist local governments.

As Midtown is developed, the availability of water will be a critical issue. It seems reasonable that the type of development that occurs and its uses will impact the City's ability to provide critical infrastructure to support such development. More density will likely increase demand for water and sewer capacity. Therefore, forward-looking planning will be important as the vision for Midtown crystallizes. Furthermore, the pace of development will also be a factor. As various parcels are developed and brought on to the market, the need for adequate water must be matched with the supply.

Forward-looking planning will be important as the vision for Midtown crystallizes.

Infrastructure Planning

The funding of public infrastructure is critical to fostering real estate development in a community. Fort Myers, particularly the Midtown area, needs infrastructure to support future growth. With limited

readily available funding, installing sorely needed infrastructure for Fort Myers has been challenging. To support the forthcoming growth of Fort Myers, the City could initiate a few steps to fund infrastructure.

The City could launch an infrastructure fund seeded from the excess tax increment within the various redevelopment districts. Instead of allocating 95% of the increment to a project, the City and the Community Redevelopment Agency could limit the amount of TIF allocation to 80% with a declining percentage over time. With an 80% allocation for TIF-related projects in the specific districts, the remaining 20% could fund public infrastructure within the redevelopment district along with eligible City TIF expenditures such as infrastructure outside the district. The 20% set-aside fund could be continuously funded for up to 20 years from the TIF increment. Infrastructure projects could be funded on an ongoing basis, or the projects could be monetized via the capital markets using bonds and similar debt instruments.

Another possible tool to support infrastructure investment is the creation of a Community Development District (CDD) for the targeted areas such as Midtown. A CDD typically allows the property owners in a particular area to apply a special levy in the area to support public investments such as infrastructure. The levy could then be bonded via a private placement or long-term debt instrument to provide the upfront funding for the planning and installation of the infrastructure. Additionally, the special levy could be used for ongoing maintenance of the new infrastructure. CDDs are already used in the State of Florida and Lee County. The Fort Myers Community Development District in Lee County encompasses more than 1,100 acres. It has its own governing body to plan and finance public improvements and community facilities in the district. Creating a Midtown CDD may be a possible solution to developing the needed infrastructure in the area.

Other tools to support infrastructure investments include Community Development Block Grants (CDBG) and Community Development Block Grant Disaster Recovery (CDBG-DR), which allow the financing of public facilities and improvements. A similar program to the CDBG program is the HUD Section 108, which allows a community to borrow up to five times its CDBG allocation for a given year. For example, a community that receives \$1 million in CDBG could borrow money from HUD up to five times that amount (\$5 million) to finance CDBG-eligible expenditures such as infrastructure. The loan rate from HUD will be below typical debt instruments and have a term of up to 20 years. Several cities around the United States have utilized the HUD 108 program to support public infrastructure projects.

Other tools to finance public infrastructure are special assessment revenue bonds and general obligation bonds. A combination of revenue sources could be used to service the debt on the special assessment revenue bonds, while the general obligation bonds could be serviced from property and sales taxes.

Regional Influences

Best Practices for Resiliency

While Hurricane Ian brought additional attention and stress to an already-stressed community, it also created an opportunity to capitalize on new energy and attention focused on systemic problems. This new focus can help to craft sustainable and resilient strategies for mid- and long-term redevelopment in hurricane-impacted areas. Without adequate, decent, affordable housing at all gradients of economic cohorts, it is difficult to maintain and grow an effective and responsive economy. Not only is housing development an economic engine, but housing is where jobs go to sleep at night. These efforts require deliberate leadership to preserve and improve the existing built environment and create additional opportunities within the market and the region.

Housing is complex and dynamic and requires dedicated effort to achieve progress and success. Effective disaster response requires building immediate, short-term problem solving into a long-term programmatic strategy that will benefit the community, reduce risk, and make people's lives better, all while working collectively and collaboratively with stakeholders. A collective disaster response is a continuum: Relief => Recovery => Redevelopment

The action steps and considerations include, but are not limited to:

- Data gathering, interpretation, and measurement at each phase of relief/ recovery/ redevelopment are necessary to remain nimble and responsive to a changing environment. Inflection points are necessary to understand what dynamics are in play, what areas are likely candidates for rebuilding, what areas are candidates for a longer-term strategic vision, and what areas are going to be insurance deserts in the future.
- Analyzing where and in what direction the market forces of development and construction are headed is critical. Is development demand in Midtown or further afield in the short-long-term? How can the City harness that development or address problems that result from an exodus of market participants, and how might it backfill that void with its own solutions?
- Timing is a significant issue for turning this effort into action. Changes to public policy and entitlement pathways, including zoning and permitting, density bonuses, and affordable/workforce housing policies are long-lead items that take months or years to change. Who is thinking about the long-term strategy within the local or regional government? Engage zoning officers, local planning offices, and economic development to address long-term goals.
- Local leaders and other stakeholders must work together to correct deficiencies (infrastructure, zoning, emergency services, etc.) with an eye to the future. Politicians need to be engaged, and those who are in charge of planning and zoning need to be on the leadership team to provide input and achieve buy-in.

- There is limited developable land remaining in Midtown and Fort Myers, and there are competing demands for land from industrial, commercial, hospitality and residential uses. This, coupled with the fragmentation within the market, leads to scarcity and upward pressure on pricing. If there is nearby land that is platted and serviceable by utilities, what can be done to promote development in these areas? Is there an opportunity to gain site control at a relatively low-cost basis for redevelopment to broaden housing and other opportunities?

Tactics for creating a comprehensive strategy for sustainability and resilience going forward include:

- Injecting competition into the real estate development and procurement process.
- Formalizing process and procedures to reduce predation in public funding (TIF, etc.).
- Fostering a culture of permanence.
- Being deliberate in public goal setting and in regulating and enforcing delivery.
- Being bold, proactive and not reactive.
- Understanding the community's wants and needs by asking for their ongoing input and involvement.

Insurance Predictability

Insurance is an overarching issue of critical importance. It is important due to the availability and limits that may be imposed by government and the industry. Midtown does not appear to have any unique risk exposure other than its proximity to the waterfront which is subject to flood surge. Future development will be affected by the availability and cost of insurance based on how Midtown is rated by insurance underwriters. The types of land uses that occur in Midtown will dictate the insurance required.

Current legislation under consideration in Florida is focused on taking steps to reduce litigation, to migrate policies from the state insured Citizens Property Insurance Corp., to provide more reinsurance options to insurers, and to expedite claims. Again, the insurance risks associated with the redevelopment of Midtown are not specific to Midtown but are applicable to real estate use and development in southwest Florida in general.

The legislative proposals are focused on eliminating the requirement that property insurers pay the attorney fees of policyholders who successfully file lawsuits on claims. Insurers have pointed to this provision as driving up costs and encouraging litigation. On the contrary, plaintiffs' attorneys claim the elimination of this provision would prevent insureds from making claims and pursuing valid suits.

Another factor impacting the insurance industry is the controversial practice of assigning benefits of property insurance claims to contractors who seek insurance payments, i.e., subrogation. This assignment scheme is largely attributable to increased costs and prevalence of litigation.

In addition, the state is exploring methods to increase private insurance options in order to reduce public-funded insurance programs. Various restrictions and disincentives are being explored to drive insureds from the public market to the private market. The goal is to reinvigorate the private market and increase availability and competition.

Moreover, the state is looking to create a reinsurance program that would increase reinsurance options and provide this essential backup coverage for significant losses. Reinsurance is a critical component in shoring up the insurance challenges in Florida. The state will also pursue a series of revisions including the reduction of time in which to resolve claims and shortening the window for filing initial claims.

*With reasonable insurance reforms, insurance markets should normalize over time
resulting in predictable and acceptable costs.*

Ultimately, tightening the claim process, eliminating assignment of benefits abuses and increasing private insurance options should lead to the reduction of litigation over claims which have historically been the primary reason the Florida insurance market has been unstable and expensive. With reasonable insurance reforms, insurance markets should normalize over time resulting in predictable and acceptable costs.

Tactics and Strategies

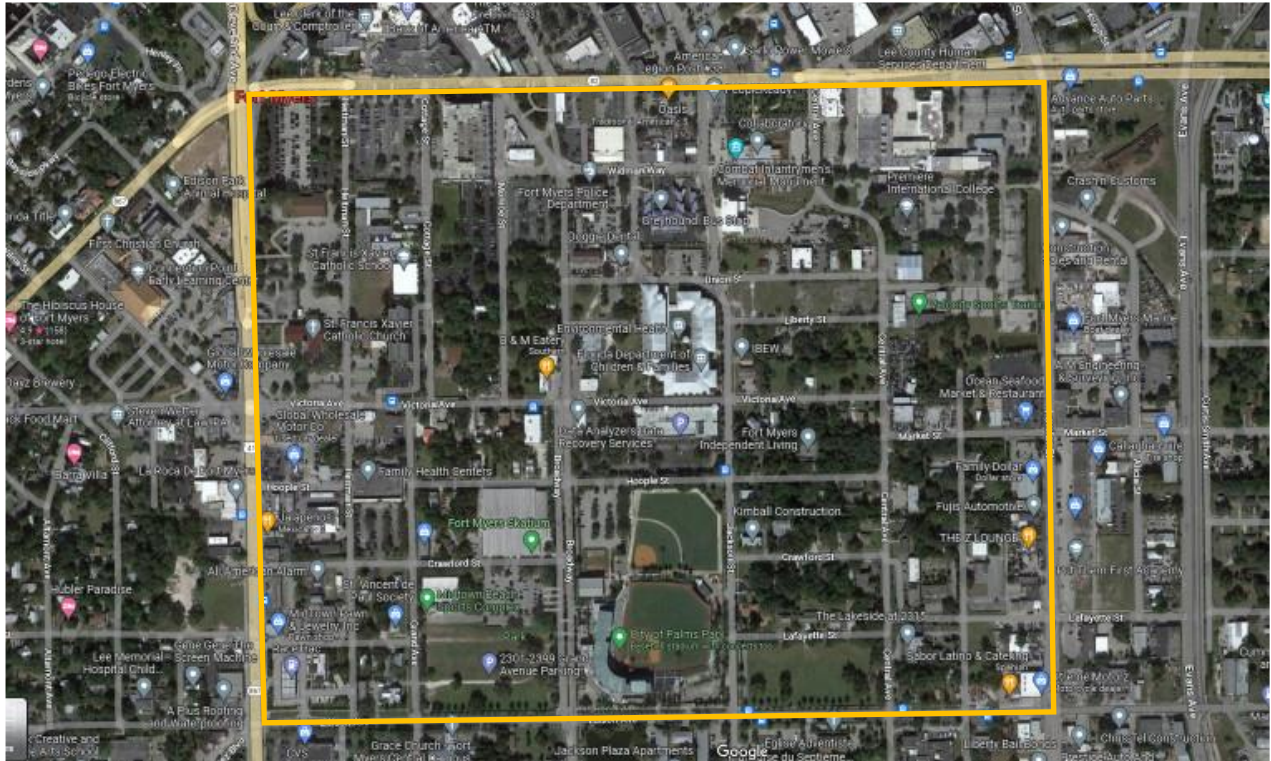
Short-term Tactics

Early projects should be prioritized based on cost and intrinsic impact for supporting the future activation of the Midtown District. For instance, careful prioritization of public infrastructure investment, including improving sidewalks, curbs, streetscape, street furniture and lighting, crosswalks, parks, and other city-owned elements is always a great investment that can leverage further private investment. Public art installations, street event programming, and banner and signage programs are effective interim and sometimes temporary opportunities to add value and create a sense of place to enliven an area. The creation of street improvements and banner and art programs which reinforce a strong central axis connecting Downtown to the Midtown District, as well as other connections to the Dunbar, Central Fort Myers, Edison Park, and Lee Memorial Hospital site along US41, would also be worthwhile early investments which would promote connectivity and placemaking for Midtown.

All gateways and perimeter roadways within the District could be promoted through signage, traffic improvements (or traffic calming measures), and other visual cues in ways that can be relatively inexpensive but which create a large impact. All four corners of the Midtown District serve as prominent and purposeful gateways to reinforce the edge of the district, but to further serve as welcoming settings to draw in passersby and adjacent communities. The team believes the convening of a broad universal connectivity planning committee will help to build important bridges with adjacent communities.

Connectivity mechanisms could include the development of linear arts or sculpture installations, a community mural program, crosswalk painting, and event programming (street closures for festivals, community walks, road races-Midtown Marathon, etc.).

Connectivity mechanisms could include the development of linear arts or sculpture installations, a community mural program, crosswalk painting, and event programming (street closures for festivals, community walks, road races-Midtown Marathon, etc.). Further, for future development sites, particularly city-controlled sites, the installation of pre-construction-type boundary signage which creates site interest or which provides cues as to future potential uses or opportunities could be very effective in raising awareness of future development opportunities.



Long-term Site Strategies

The development of the Midtown District provides a tremendous opportunity to build upon existing strengths, to extend the energy of Downtown while connecting to other surrounding neighborhoods, and to bring new uses to the area to create novel and innovative energy and activities. Midtown can be reinvented through the planned curation of uses to attain the shared vision of a vibrant Midtown community.

There are many issues that still need to be addressed, including the aspirational balance of different land uses, whether future Midtown assets will serve local residents or attract tourists, and whether amateur sports or other entertainment destinations will ultimately be successful. However, the Consulting Corps has outlined some useful next steps for a few priority sites and issues.

Stadium

As stated above, the ballpark stadium presents special challenges to the City. When initially conceived, there was a strong commitment from the Boston Red Sox that made the venue viable. Since this heyday, the facility has struggled over the past ten years to find a user or users that would make it economically viable again. Various other baseball users have come and gone. None of these other users from the parks and recreation leagues to the college teams have materialized as long-term users.

The City leadership must make a strong decision about the future of the stadium facility. The team recommends that the City take a two-step approach in addressing the stadium facility. The stadium is a valuable asset that should be tested for viability in the short term, particularly given the historical importance of baseball and this venue to the history of Fort Myers. This would require that the City allocate, for a specific short-term period, an appropriate level of resources (for renovation, potential adaptation and operating costs) and establish and empower focused staff to attempt to create value from the stadium facility. Performance measures should be established in order to define successful operation of the facility that provides benefits to Midtown and Fort Myers.

If this focused and properly resourced attention to the facility creates tangible (revenue and related economic development) and intangible (vibrancy, community partnerships, tourism or institutional attraction) within the short term, say 2-3 years, then the City may decide to continue the facility operation or further invest in the facility to attract more activity. However, City leadership should agree now that if during this period, established performance measures are not met, demolition is imminent. This interim period has the dual advantage of testing the viability of this valuable stadium asset while also allowing the developability of the site to mature and add value if the stadium opportunity is not viable.

The Consulting Corps team believes the City should solicit requests for proposals for events, tournaments or tenants who might commit to operate the stadium for this short-term period, such as two to three years to determine a sustainable revenue stream or other intangible benefits that would accrue to the City. If a viable user or users does not succeed, then the City should consider demolishing the facility to prepare the site for a future alternate use to eliminate the current maintenance and carry costs. The process of establishing a future use may take some time. The City will need to prepare to carry and secure the land for some period as the rest of Midtown develops. Again, the goal is to find the long-term highest and best use for this facility (or adaptive reuse) or the land (new development).

Skatium

The Skatium appears to be currently viable as an indoor ice hockey and training facility. The Skatium needs a facelift and additional improvement in order to position it for optimum use. The ancillary revenue-producing businesses like a restaurant and bar should be upgraded to further support operations. With the introduction of a public private partnership and sponsorships, the existing roller rink could be converted to a second sheet of ice. This additional capacity could attract women's ice hockey and be a catalyst for creating a regional destination.

This destination also may pull in Olympic training and other tournament series to the facility. The additional land behind the Skatium could be developed for a roller rink or other shared uses, including indoor soccer, field hockey, pickleball or other uses. The volleyball courts next door also could be expanded and incorporated into the complex. Various facilities, such as lockers, weight training, and

Skatium Indoor Ice Rink Facility

restaurants and bars could be shared between these uses creating a vibrant and youth-oriented destination.

The News Press Site

For many reasons, the un-redeveloped News Press site represents a malfunction of vision. The News Press is a large, highly visible, assembled site, which sits at the symbolic eastern gateway to Downtown Fort Myers. The site is also located on the main route (Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd.) from the local major expressway (I-75), and Edison Bridge south-bound traffic travels directly by the site. That the City of Fort Myers owns this key strategic parcel reflects great foresight; however, a site of this significance deserves much greater planning and forethought than has been accomplished to date. It is important to carefully plan, market, and curate the development of this site to best serve the future goals of Fort Myers.

The Consulting Corps team believes that patient and thoughtful consideration and planning of this site and potential future opportunities may cause the development of this site to be postponed, at least for the near term. The best use for this site may need to develop and ripen over the near future. Any partial, unintentional, or perfunctory development of this key City-owned asset would be a significant lost opportunity and detriment to Fort Myers. This extended time will allow the City to manage expectations of stakeholders, the public, and potential end users, to build value, and to better encourage and educate development markets as to the City's goals for the site. Indeed, it may be very advantageous to delay developing the site during this current economic cycle characterized by high interest rates and inflation. Fort Myers should consider the future development of this site as one of its most important assets.

However, there are many interim steps that must be taken to properly prepare the site and to maximize its developability. Initially, the City should evaluate and identify any potential reuse of existing structures, attempt to remove or neutralize any development constraints, and plan for adjacent and nearby sites which impact or gain value from the future development of the site. For instance, if there is any clean-up, demolition or site preparation that will make the site more attractive to developers, the City should consider undertaking this work in the meantime.

Interim uses should be considered for the existing structures and outdoor areas beyond the Salvation Army sorting function, including a potential movie set location, paintball or similar entertainment activities, community gardens on raised beds, public art, (insert photo of YOU ARE BEAUTIFUL-type temporary public art) and even fire/search and rescue training. Interim uses could help defray carrying costs throughout the site marketing and development selection process.

Further, it is critical that the soft marketing of the site start as soon as possible. For instance, the site should be visually enhanced to make it more attractive to the many daily passersby. The site's future availability for development should be highlighted now through attractive site signage and banners to

draw attention to the site. Signage could provide cues for what uses could potentially be anticipated at the site (i.e., “if you lived here, you would be home by now” and “Future home of...?”). The team understands that the City plans to undertake a market study for the site to better understand the highest and best uses and capacity of the site to support various real estate product and development types. This information could be shared on the Fort Myers website and distributed to the development community to instigate more interest in the site.

The time between now and the completion of the pre-development process and until the market may further mature is a perfect time to prepare solicitation materials to attract the broadest development interest as possible for the uses the City deems desirable for the site. In order to attract the best and most-qualified potential developers, the City can attempt to reduce development uncertainty on as many levels as possible. It is important that the City be viewed as a viable and capable development partner which has clear goals and criteria for development of the site. The City can further look to streamline design and associated development approvals. The City could also create Midtown-specific streetscape and design guidelines, target necessary public infrastructure investment, and determine a system of water permit pre-approval for specific uses.

The team believes that the City should engage an experienced development advisor who would facilitate several Request for Qualifications (RFQ)/Request for Proposals (RFP) workshops for City leadership, staff, and other stakeholders to develop a broad shared vision and aspirational goals for future site development, and to educate and inspire decision-makers. Highlights from all prior plans, market information and stakeholder input should be included in this workshop to help inform this vision and goals. This session should include such broad discussions as whether the preferred use of the site would be a government complex or the location of a performance arts center, a business or medical innovation center, housing, restaurants, and/or other uses. This process will also allow for the discussion of an appropriate and acceptable level of potential municipal support and incentives for the project in order to encourage specific aspirational goal achievement for the City.

The Consulting Corps highly recommends a two-stage RFQ/RFP process.

The Consulting Corps highly recommends a two-stage RFQ/RFP process for three reasons. First, the RFQ process allows the attraction of the greatest breadth of developers while communicating the City’s future vision for the site. Second, an RFQ is instrumental in properly vetting and evaluating the viability, capability, and financial capacity of potential developers. Lastly, an RFQ process is significantly less expensive for a potential developer to respond to which will broaden the field of responses and demonstrate the importance of developer competence and a successful track record. Very clear developer criteria should be created and included in the RFQ document to establish eligibility of developers.

The following RFP would then clearly outline both City-mandated requirements and aspirational goals for the site. The clearer these City mandates and goals for the site development are drafted, the more likely the developer responses will reflect the City's vision for the project. Only eligible and approved potential developers will be asked to respond to the RFP process. It is critical to set out explicit prioritized development selection criteria within the document in order to guide the submission of development proposals that include all mandated elements and characteristics, while optimizing as many aspiration project goals as possible.

The next step of the RFQ/P process is perhaps the most important, which is the engagement of the local and national development community and broader market. The distribution of the RFQ/P must be very deliberate and broad, proactively attracting the specific types of developers that can successfully deliver the site development that is desired. This cannot be understated. Passivity in attracting developers will result in a smaller response pool, which will make it very difficult for decision-makers to pick the best project, or potentially to pick any project at all. It is also very important to demonstrate to developers that the short-list and ultimate selection process will be fair, transparent, and inclusive. The team believes these steps will net the best long-term value and impact for the City in the development of the News Press site.

Government Facilities

As mentioned above regarding the team's concern for the high levels of government and institutional ownership in the Downtown and Midtown Districts, the team encourages the City, County, and State to consider how these assets can better contribute to the future of Fort Myers. While some of these functions are best located in the Downtown and Midtown area, it is oftentimes the case that these facilities may be best located elsewhere to better serve target populations or to support operations. The additional benefit of moving some of these functions out of the Downtown area is that it opens up more space for other types of attractive uses which will contribute to the vibrancy of the Downtown and Midtown areas. It is important to think boldly while prioritizing the City's long-term legacy when considering the location of these functions, particularly as the City's development patterns and goals have changed over time.

CITY-COUNTY JOINT BUILDING

There has been discussion in the past that the current City Hall site could be better used as a non-governmental use given its central location Downtown. There appears to be a sense that these government functions are not necessarily reliant on a Downtown location. There also has been discussion surrounding the possibility of a new joint City-County facility that could be near the Downtown and Midtown Districts. The team encourages the City and County to consider a joint administration facility very near or adjacent to Downtown and Midtown for several reasons. First, the City of Fort Myers and Lee County are very intertwined in their goals and increased interaction and sharing of information would be greatly augmented in a joint facility. Further to the benefit of the symbolic unification of the City and County if they shared a facility, there are likely to be redundancies,

use of shared resources, and economies of scale that could benefit both parties. In addition, the location of a joint City-County facility in a location adjacent or near the central city area would help to catalyze further activity and demand in a neighborhood that could benefit.

The team encourages the City and County to consider a joint administration facility very near or adjacent to Downtown and Midtown

For these reasons, the team believes that a bold move of this sort should be considered, both for its potential to spur more development and activity in a nearby community, but also because it would free up important space to strengthen both Downtown and Midtown Districts. Particularly given the prime locations of the City and County administrative facilities in the heart of Downtown and along the major axis connecting the waterfront through Downtown, across MLK Blvd. and southward through the Midtown District, this move could significantly impact the future vitality of both Districts.

OTHER PUBLIC BUILDINGS

Another important consideration is whether to relocate the Downtown jail, and possibly the court system, to another site. The prominence of these facilities and their specific functions flanking MLK Blvd. Downtown at the important connecting edge shared by Midtown and US41, creates a less than desirable impression of the area to residents and visitors, and attracts significant number of ancillary uses which are an additional negative influence on the area. While these may be longer-term moves as many forces would need to be aligned and due to the large cost of replacing these facilities, it is important to consider these priorities during the City's planning processes.

POLICE HEADQUARTERS

Lastly, the need for a new police headquarters is being considered within the Midtown area. While the need for public safety is paramount, this is a facility that, similarly, the team believes, should be located outside, but near, the Downtown and Midtown District, particularly given the already high level of government presence and coverage in the area. Due to the police's specific function and activities, the large size of the facility, the need for large amounts of parking, desire for an indoor shooting range, evidence storage, and other facilities, this facility will have tremendous impact on the area in which it is located. Again, there may be a better location that will also serve the needs of the police including being more central to the entire city population, having greater access to more main arterials, while also providing a stabilizing influence on a community.

The Consulting Corps recognizes the concern related to the linkage of the timing and location of the new Police facility with the receipt of the HUD Choice Neighborhoods Implementation (CNI) Grant. The team understands that there were other sites within the CNI area that were considered by the police that, while not their preferred site, should be reconsidered, potentially while revisiting the included program

elements and function of the facility. If one of these CNI area sites are not found to be a good fit, the team encourage the City of Fort Myers to approach HUD to reconsider the proposed site of the Police Headquarters within the CNI area to see if sites near or adjacent to the CNI area would be suitable. Otherwise, perhaps alternative City projects or investments could be considered to meet the HUD CNI requirements for local match. A decision of a new police headquarters located in Midtown affects the future of the Midtown District and should be very carefully and thoughtfully considered.

Conclusion

Midtown, Fort Myers represents both a significant real estate challenge and an extraordinary opportunity for community and economic growth with a shared vision for Midtown that is inclusive and actionable. Addressing the challenges while creating community and enhancing mutual benefit is the common thread throughout this journey. Including a wide variety of stakeholders and demands allows for a more dynamic and robust set of solutions that are durable and resilient. In order for the community to realize Midtown as a success, corrective action is required within a number of government functions, including planning and land use, economic and community development, and TIF and public assistance administration. In order to best leverage municipal assets, the City of Fort Myers must develop an enhanced collaborative relationship with comparable and complementary functions within Lee County government and the private development community. In addition, nonprofit and civic leaders such as Collaboratory, can be valuable partners which should be tapped. Without robust and resilient infrastructure, planning efforts will not materialize into actionable and transformative strategies, which is why it is critically important the community increase water, connectivity, and transit capacity within Midtown and surrounding neighborhoods in order to drive community and economic growth.

Fort Myers is asset rich. Not every city is. The City should capitalize on the existing assets, natural and otherwise, to enhance connections to and opportunities within Midtown. More deliberate and thoughtful connections to Downtown, the waterfront, arts and culture, and the seasonal resident populations will enhance economic opportunities and foster a sense of community within Midtown. Creating a vibrant community where one does not currently exist and activating Midtown through placemaking are the long-term, sustainable strategies that will uplift and enhance Midtown, adjacent districts, and, ultimately, all of Fort Myers.

Throughout this report, problems have been analyzed, recommendations have been made, and strategies have been outlined to address many of the issues Midtown faces and to spur activation of the district. It is essential to begin immediately addressing these issues and maintain focus and follow-through. The Consulting Corps team is optimistic that significant progress can be made with a collaborative and inclusive effort of enhancing developability, placemaking and community creation.

Appendix I – Case Studies and Resources

Business Improvement District (BID) examples:

- Lincoln Road BID <https://lincolnrld.com/lrbid/>
- Coconut Grove BID <https://coconutgrove.com/about/>

Main Street Program: <https://www.mainstreet.org/home>

Main Street is a nonprofit organization that provides training and resources to assist local communities revitalize historic neighborhoods, create jobs, attract visitors, and generate economic development.

Downtown Development Authority examples in Florida:

- Delray Beach <https://downtowndelraybeach.com/>
- Miami <https://www.miamidda.com/>

Business Leaders Civic Engagement:

- Roswell Next is an example of young business leaders engaged in civic life:
<https://roswellnext.org/>
- Greater MSP is a regional partnership which brings together corporate, philanthropic, and elected leaders around shared economic development priorities.
 - o <https://www.greatermsp.org/pages/the-partnership/>
 - o Indicators: <https://www.greatermsp.org/regional-indicators-2021/>

Homeownership Development Programs

<https://www.floridahousing.org/programs/homeowners/homeownership-development-programs/homeownership-programs>

Housing in a Hurry? This Passivhaus-Certified Modular Building Is All-Electric

<https://www.treehugger.com/passivhaus-modular-all-electric-housing-in-a-hurry-6500017>

Florida Dept. of Environmental Protection's Division of [Water Restoration Assistance](#) is the group that handles grants and loans to assist local governments. Angela Knecht is the Director (Angela.Knecht@FloridaDEP.gov / 850-245-2934).

Examples of regional economic development entities:

- JAXUSA <https://jaxusa.org/>
- Miami-Dade Beacon Council <https://www.beaconcouncil.com/>
- Orlando Economic Partnership <https://orlando.org/>
- Tampa Bay Economic Development Council <https://tampabayedc.com/>

Appendix II – TIF Policies and Applications and RFP/RFQ Examples

TIF Policy Examples

San Antonio, Texas, TIF Program Policy:

<https://www.sanantonio.gov/Portals/0/Files/NHSD/TIF/ProgramPolicy.pdf>

Austin, Texas, TIF Policy: <https://www.austintexas.gov/edims/document.cfm?id=325563>

Shelby County, Tennessee TIF Manual:

<https://www.shelbycountyttn.gov/DocumentCenter/View/32088/TIF-Manual-Revised-Dec-2017?bidId=>

TIF Application Examples

Dallas, Texas, TIF Funding Application:

<https://www.dallasecodel.org/DocumentCenter/View/2008/Development-Incentive-Application-Updated-Jan-2022-PDF?bidId=>

San Antonio, Texas, TIF Funding Application:

<https://www.sanantonio.gov/Portals/0/Files/NHSD/TIF/TIRZ/TIFFundingApplication.pdf>

St. Louis, Missouri, TIF Funding Application: [https://www.stlouis-](https://www.stlouis-mo.gov/government/departments/slsc/documents/upload/TIF-Overview-and-Application-October-2014.pdf)

[mo.gov/government/departments/slsc/documents/upload/TIF-Overview-and-Application-October-2014.pdf](https://www.stlouis-mo.gov/government/departments/slsc/documents/upload/TIF-Overview-and-Application-October-2014.pdf)

RFP/RFQ Examples

Haig Point Gateway Village [RFQ](#) (Request for Qualifications)

Haig Point Gateway Village [RFP](#) (Request for Proposals)

Clay County Rural Development Authority [RFP for Lake Chatuge Hotel](#)

- <https://www.rfplakechatuge.com/>

Canton Downtown Development Authority [RFP for Jones Mercantile Building](#) Redevelopment

Appendix III – Acknowledgements

We thank Collaboratory for the opportunity to offer assistance to the City of Fort Myers. Our sincere appreciation to the staff and leadership for the warm welcome and their hospitality during our stay in Fort Myers. Thanks to Woody Hanson, CRE, for introducing The Counselors to Collaboratory.

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Mickey Alessio, Managing Partner, Alessio Companies

Jeffery Allbritten, President, Florida SouthWestern State College

Kevin Anderson, Mayor, City of Fort Myers

Steve Belden, Community Development Director, City of Fort Myers

Frank Bonafilia, Executive Director, Edison Awards

Darla Bonk, Councilperson, City of Fort Myers

Joe Bonora, President, Catalyst Asset Management

Dana Brunett, Director, Business Development, Lee County Economic Development

Fred Burson, Councilman, City of Fort Myers City Council

Jennifer Carpenter, Assistant Director, South District, Florida Dept. of Environmental Protection

Ryan Carter, President, Scotlynn USA Division Inc

Joe Coleman, General Counsel, Florida SouthWestern State College

Marcia Davis, Director, Housing Authority

Molly Deckart, Executive Director, Alliance for the Arts

David Filler, Investments Partner Florida & S.E. Regions, SunTex Marinas

Lee Ford, Vice Chairman, 21st Century Collaboration

Gary Griffin, President, B&I Contractors

Michele Hylton-Terry, Director, Fort Myers CRA

Paxton Kinol, BluMark Capital, LLC

Marty Lawing, City Manager, City of Fort Myers

John Lege, III, Assistant City Manager, City of Fort Myers

Gary Maier, Program Administrator, Florida Dept. of Environmental Protection

Michael Martin, President, Florida Gulf Coast University

Eric Metz, Developer, SunTex Marinas

John Meyers, Deputy Chief, Fort Myers Police Department

Jeff Mielke, Executive Director, Lee County Sports Development

Michael Miller, Principal, Gelman Companies

Nicole Monahan, City Engineer, City of Fort Myers

Bryan Myers

Tom Oliveri, President of West Florida, Northern Trust

Cecil Pendergrass, Commissioner, Lee County

Randy Pepitone, Deputy Chief, Fort Myers Police Department

Frank Scarpaci, III, General Manager and Coach, Florida Jr. Eels

Matt Simmons, Maxwell, Hendry & Simmons

Sawyer Smith, Managing Partner, Wilbur Smith

Ryan Snyder, Environmental Manager, South District, Florida Dept. of Environmental Protection

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John Talmage, Director, Lee County Economic Development

Gary Tasman, Cushman & Wakefield Commercial Property Southwest

Evelyn Valdes, Staff, Lee County Economic Development

Roger Valdivia, Lieutenant, Fort Myers Police Department

Doug VanOort, Former Chairman and CEO, NeoGenomics

Teresa Watkins Brown, Councilwoman, City of Fort Myers

Steve Weathers, Economic Development Director, City of Fort Myers

Ken Weiner, President, The Weiner Companies

Appendix IV – The Counselors of Real Estate® and CRE® Consulting Corps

The Counselors of Real Estate® is an international organization of commercial property professionals from leading real estate, financial, law, valuation, and business advisory firms, as well as real property experts in academia and government. Membership is selective and extended by invitation; commercial real estate practitioners with 10 years of proven experience may apply.

Counselors have created and endowed the MIT Center for Real Estate; resolved the dispute between the developer of the World Trade Center and its insurers post Sept. 11, 2001; led the privatization of U.S. Army Housing; developed a multi-billion-dollar, 10-year master plan for Philadelphia Public Schools; and valued both the Grand Canyon and Yale University. Counselors reside in 20 countries and U.S. territories, with only 1,000 professionals holding the CRE credential worldwide.

CRE Members:

- Recognized records of accomplishment
- Commitment to excellence
- Uncompromising adherence to high standards of professional conduct
- Visionary, yet practical approaches, to real estate issues

The CRE Consulting Corps, a public service program created and managed by The Counselors of Real Estate, provides real estate analysis and action plans for municipalities, not-for-profit organizations, educational institutions, and government agencies that address their clients' real estate dilemmas and often enhance the performance of a property or a portfolio. Each Consulting Corps project is conducted by a small group of volunteer members selected for experience and skillsets to address the specific needs of the client. The extensive talent base available within the CRE community ensures that teams can provide expertise on virtually any real estate issue.

CRE Consulting Corps

- Reliable solutions from experienced professionals
- Non-partisan, objective advice
- Exceptional service for fees that are a fraction of current market value
- Advice and recommendations provided quickly on site

Finding the Right CRE

Credentialed members of The Counselors of Real Estate are available to assist with your real estate challenge. Visit the CRE website to find the right CRE at <https://cre.org/find-a-cre-search/> or contact CRE staff members for assistance in identifying Counselors with the right skill sets to address your needs.

Appendix V – The Team

The Counselors of Real Estate Consulting Corps team assisting Fort Myers:



Cassandra J. Francis, CRE, FRICS, FAICP, FCI Arb, MLAI, LEED AP BD+C
KARIATID

Chicago, Illinois

cassandrajfrancis@gmail.com

Cassandra J. Francis, CRE, has over twenty-five years of diverse real estate, construction and urban planning experience concentrated at the nexus of the public and private sectors. Currently, Cassandra leads an international real estate, construction and planning advisory services practice and conducts civil commercial mediations specializing in real estate and construction disputes worldwide. Having worked in the commercial real estate, construction, transportation, brownfields, housing, infrastructure, banking, Olympic Games and non-profit industries, Cassandra applies her broad experience to enhance projects, programs and processes. Cassandra is both a pro-development contributor to the built environment and an advocate for high-quality open space within the public realm. Cassandra is a Counselor of Real Estate (CRE), a Fellow of the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors (FRICS) and the Chartered Institute of Arbitrators (FCI Arb), is certified by and is a Fellow of the American Institute of Certified Planners (FAICP) and is a LEED Accredited Professional for Building Design and Construction (LEED AP BD+C).



Monica Hagewood, CRE

Principal

Strata Real Estate Alliance, LLP

Roswell, Georgia

mbhagewood@stratare.com

Monica Battell Hagewood, CRE, is the founder & principal of Strata Real Estate Alliance, LLP. Founded in 1997, Strata provides advisory services for the commercial real estate industry by delivering consulting & strategic planning for real estate assets and portfolios across many markets, to clients large & small. Recognized as an industry leader, with a specialty in the integration of financial, design, and market projections, Monica was awarded the designation of Counselor of Real Estate in 2002. Clients have included major Wall Street investors, local investment companies, brokerage firms, mortgage companies, and private investors, as well as municipalities and local authorities. Prior experience includes asset management for a multi-family REIT Security Capital Atlantic, Inc. and real estate asset management for Metropolitan Life Insurance Company. Monica served as Chairman for the Downtown Development Authority Roswell, Georgia, and Board Member of the Roswell Arts Fund. She earned a Master of Business Administration–Real Estate at Georgia State University and Bachelor of Landscape Architecture from the University of Florida.

**Brett Pelletier, CRE**

Chief Operating Officer

Kirk & Company: Real Estate Counselors

Boston, Massachusetts

bpelletier@kirkco.com

Brett Pelletier, CRE, is a finance and land economics professional specializing in commercial real estate problem solving and affordable housing finance, advisory, and policy matters. An adjunct faculty member of Salve Regina University's Department of Business and Economics and the Cummings School of Architecture at Roger Williams University, he teaches courses in real estate. Professional and academic interests include: Land Economics, Real Estate Finance, Land Use Planning, Healthy Housing, Housing and Economic Equality, Community Development and High-Performance Building Standards.

He is a recognized expert in affordable housing finance and analysis and has specialized experience advising municipalities, non-profit developers, and private entities on adaptive reuse of historic buildings, affordable housing planning and analysis, and strategic decision-making functions. He received a BS in Finance from Bentley College, an MBA from Bryant University Graduate School of Business, and a Master of Liberal Arts in Finance from Harvard Extension School. He is on the Board of Directors of Preserve Rhode Island and contributing writer for the New England Real Estate Journal, among other involvements.

**Courtney Pogue, CRE**

Senior Director

National Development Council

Nashville, Tennessee

cpogue@ndconline.org

Courtney D. Pogue, CRE, leads the National Development Council's innovative Supporting Empowered Emerging Developers (SEED) Academy, a high-impact, intensive training and technical assistance program for start-up emerging real estate developers. Courtney joined NDC from the Metropolitan Government of Nashville and Davidson County, Tennessee, where he was Director of Economic and Community Development.

Prior to Nashville, Courtney held similar roles as Director of Economic Development for the City of Dallas, Texas, Clayton County, Georgia and for Cook County, IL. At the City of Dallas, he managed a department that fostered more than \$2.8 billion in private investment and 15,000+ job commitments. He managed programs including: tax increment financing, new markets tax credits, Section 380 economic development, tax abatement, and small business development. This public service followed 15 years in corporate and investment banking, commercial real estate finance, and real estate advisory experience.

Courtney was named one of North America's Top 50 Economic Development Directors by Consultant Connect in 2020 and 2022. Courtney holds an MBA from the University of Notre Dame and a BBA in Finance from Howard University.



Stephen Romine, Esq., CRE
 Partner
 Williams Mullen
 Virginia Beach, Virginia
sromine@williamsmullen.com

Steve Romine, Esq., CRE, focuses his practice on commercial real estate, land use, financing and business matters. He routinely serves as counsel for owners, developers, financial institutions, telecommunications companies and utilities in commercial transactions. His experience includes entity formation, acquisition, financing, land use approval, zoning, restructuring, leasing and environmental compliance. Steve is a former chair of the Virginia State Bar's Real Property Section and a former president of the Hampton Roads Association for Commercial Real Estate. He is the immediate past chair of the Hampton Roads Chamber and is a member and trustee of its Regional Executive Committee. He also serves as Vice Chair of the YMCA of South Hampton Roads and on its Executive Committee. He is listed in The Best Lawyers in America® for Corporate Law, Land Use and Zoning Law and Real Estate Law (2006-2022). Steve has also been listed in Virginia Super Lawyers for Land Use/Zoning Law (2012-2018). Steve earned his J.D., M.B.A. and B.A. from the University of Richmond.



CRE Consulting Corps Team in Fort Myers, December 2022

